POPULAR STYLE IN OLD BULGARIAN ART

CHOUDOMIR CHERNEV

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Introduction

All those who have seen the paintings of the old Bulgarian masters have been greatly impressed by the compelling power of their art. Art historians have variously appraised these works and their active impact on the viewer has always been pointed out as their distinctive feature and principal merit. Almost all students of Old Bulgarian art have noted its closeness to that of the East, to the painting which developed during the pre-iconoclastic period in Asia Minor, Syria and Coptic Egypt, without, however, trying to establish the causes for this, without trying to analyze the whole picture of Bulgarian culture on the basis of the rich material furnished by the existing paintings.

The circumstance that as late as the 16th and 17th centuries some Bulgarian frescos and icons contained compositions which were created in the 6th and 7th centuries in Syria and Cappadocia and which were subsequently known in a number of versions, shows convincingly that the preference of our old masters for Eastern models was due to something more than conservatism, that these Eastern models contained something which appealed to them and which was very different from the traditional Byzantine artistic conceptions. Bearing in mind the close economic, political and cultural relations which existed between the Bulgarian state and the Byzantine Empire during the Middle Ages, these ties with the Near and Middle East become even more indicative of the role and importance of Bulgarian art in the cultural life of Medieval Europe.

The preference for certain compositions and figures, the addition of a number of popular Bulgarian saints, including the Slav educationists, the Brothers Cyril and Methodius, to the range of personages depicted, the highly decorative quality of the Bulgarian icons and murals, the conscious search for monumental effects in the painting of figures, the psychological insight into the subjects treated and the master's admirably sparing use of means of expression, all this goes to show the creative maturity of Bulgarian religious art. These are features that convincingly reveal the depth of knowledge and the distinctive qualities in the outlook of our old masters, who in their work showed that they had grown out of the representational and rigid mysticism of the Byzantine art of Constantinople.

The aim of the present volume is to show the specific features in the style and world outlook of our old masters against the background of the historical development of the Bulgarian people, to illustrate the artistic development by means of the most important monuments of Bulgarian art, to suggest to the reader interested in Old Bulgarian art some of those complex problems which it poses and which indicate the continuity between antique culture and the culture of the Middle Ages, and finally, to emphasize the close links which existed between the art of the East and that of the Balkans.

The Author

In the course of nearly a whole millennium, Old Bulgarian art developed within the rigid canons of the Eastern Orthodox church. It compelled medieval painters to propagate the Christian ideas of the structure of the world, to uphold religious morals and ethics, to help inculcate in the people's masses ideas rejecting the real world and life on earth, ideas which draw people's hopes to heaven and to the imaginary 'eternal life'. All this made painting a supplement to the pompous church ritual, to the solemn and mystical atmosphere of the Orthodox church.

The religious character of the murals and icons determines their subject matter. It includes scenes and events described in the scriptures, the Bible, the Gospel and in the lives of various saints. The favourite themes are episodes of the life of Christ and the Virgin.

Beautiful murals turn the walls of churches into an impressive pictorial narrative. They enliven and lend authenticity to the legendary story of the Gospel, instil tremendous active force into the figures and carry the worshipper into the world of abstract ideas. The reader who unfolds the pages of the rich festal gospels is delighted by the miniatures, tail-pieces and illuminated initial letters which lavishly decorate many of the holy books. What aesthetic ideas that art was supposed to rouse in people's souls is best seen in the writings of the idealist philosophers of late antiquity and of the Christian theologians. 'Everything should be perceived through the senses', the Roman philosopher Plotinus wrote as early as the 3rd century, 'but we must be convinced that there are other things that are felt only by the spirit, and that to hear or understand does not mean merely to hear, nor merely to see'.[1] Dionysius the Areopagite is even more explicit when he asserts that 'the beautiful and the good in God are one and that unity is the cause for the appearance of things beautiful and good.' The great Byzantine philosopher John Damascene later added: 'Divine beauty shines, not through any figures and not through the beauty of

the image because of the loveliness of form and colour, but because it is contemplated in bliss, in harmony with virtue.'

These ideas reveal the meaning of the whole Christian culture. They determine not only the purpose of art but the place of the artist in that religious society. The task of the artist had been formulated, he had to portray 'divine grace', to create an art which was to bring the believer closer to his God. The history of Eastern Orthodox art, and particularly of Byzantine art, shows with what difficulty that new style was being formed, and how life with its untamed vigour stepped in even where great efforts were made to disregard it.

Throughout its long historical development Old Bulgarian painting never lost its realistic and deeply humanistic character, because it never lost touch with the people. It was this popular basis and appeal which preserved it from the frigid mysticism and alienated officialdom of Constantinople art. André Grabar, one of the first students of Old Bulgarian art, perceived two clearly defined trends in its historical development. One of them is linked with the tastes and needs of the feudal class and the tsar's court and stylistically resembles very closely official Byzantine art. The other trend reflects the tastes, ideas and social aspirations of the people.

A closer scrutiny of the few monuments of art which have survived from earlier periods reveals at once the complexity of the problem of the genesis of Old Bulgarian painting; how widely differing in time and origin were the elements which blended to form it; and to what original treatment they were subjected in order to be embodied as constructive material in the formation of Bulgarian art. One of the most important questions in defining the characteristics of our medieval painting is the question of elucidating the sources that went to enrich its subject matter and style.

These problems go back to the heritage of antiquity in our art and to the state of artistic life in the Balkans at the time of the formation of the Bulgarian state. As early as the period between the 4th and the 6th centuries the Balkan provinces of the Byzantine Empire became the homeland of a great Christian art, in which the artistic concepts of the Greek and Roman world blended with those of the Eastern Mediterranean. 'Throughout the early Byzantine period the prestige of Asia Minor, Syria and Egypt, i. e. the places in which the legendary events of the Gospel were set, was very high indeed.'[2] Roused by Christianity to active spiritual and political life, the nations of Hither and Central Asia became trendsetters in the development of Christian painting. Their artistic works, sometimes rather crude, but always original and expressive, prevailed over the aesthetic concepts of the ancient Greek and Roman art with its inherent preference for the poetic idealization of reality. Mesopotamia and Persia were the scene of particularly brisk activity at the time, with the Turkic, Iranian and Sarmatian tribes and peoples rising like a threatening wave. They brought with them the fabulously rich world of their popular and ornamental art. The constantly growing needs of the church for representational art compelled the Eastern peoples to combine Hellenistic anthropomorphism with the ornamental art of the Nomads, thus achieving a vitality and expressiveness in painting which had been unknown till that time. The Hellenistic artistic tradition, with the changes introduced by the Eastern peoples, acquired a peculiar mystical flavour derived from the old local pugan cults. While the old centres of Hellenistic culture — Antioch, Ephesus and Alexandria — developed as lively centres of Christian art, in the towns of Nasibis and Edessa in Asia Minor whole schools of theology flourished, with whose help the local tribes created their own Christian iconography for purely didactical purposes.[3]

That Eastern art, which proved too crude for the aristocratic tastes of the Byzantine capital, exerted a rapidly growing influence in the Balkans pene-

trating there through the old channels established between Hither Asia and Southeastern Europe in the Early Bronze Age. These Eastern ideas in the young Christian art underwent some changes under the existing local conditions. Greek and Roman traditions left such a deep imprint on Balkan art that they could not be entirely ignored. A certain softening and refinement is felt, and there is a tendency of bringing the art of Asia Minor closer to that of the Hellenistic Egypt and to Coptic art. These tendencies are most apparent in the traces of murals in the Red Church near the village of Peroushtitsa, Plovdiv district. These murals date back to the 7th century and in their style bear a resemblance to the Egyptian-Coptic art. The story told in continuous friezes, the personification of some natural forces and the characteristic details of the figures' costumes are features which these murals share with the Alexandrian scrolls and the murals of the Bawît church and the basilica of Constantine in Bethlehem. The already established Balkan tradition in Christian painting continued to develop after the arrival of the Slavs and Proto-Bulgarians. But since it was isolated from the great art centres of Byzantium, Christian painting in Bulgaria retained many archaic features which later became manifest in early medieval art in Bulgaria. In the 10th century, church construction on a grand scale took place in the new capital of Preslav, bringing with it a rapid development of painting. The technique of painted ceramic decoration became very widespread, and beside the purely decorative motifs, figures of saints were also painted on clay, bearing close resemblance to murals or icons. In the excavations of the Patleina Monastery near Preslav in 1922, twenty ceramic fragments were discovered, and of these the portrait of St Theodor Stratilates was later reconstructed almost entirely (Fig. 1).

Even in that earliest monument of Old Bulgarian art known so far, the influences of the Eastern preiconoclastic traditions and of local art are observable. The large head of the saint is effectively set against the pale rose background of the baked tiles, enhancing the linear treatment of the gentle face, full of religious spirit, and with an expression of the eyes showing complete estrangement from earthly matters. Both the technique and the style of the figure indicate the strong links of Bulgarian art to that of the East. The technique of painted cermics could not have penetrated Bulgaria through Byzantium. According to Greek and Roman tradition, marble and mosaics were the prevailing elements in the decoration of the Byzantine churches. Glazed pottery decoration came from the Moslem countries and left almost no traces in the Byzantine capital. Glazed pottery found favourable conditions for development in Bulgaria, because the Bulgarian tastes were formed by the traditions of that same Eastern ornamental art. The Bulgarians who had recently been converted to Christianity were apparently unable to break at once with the tastes and ideas of their ancestors, in spite of the ambition of Tsar Simeon to establish the Byzantine aesthetic concepts as valid for at least the official art of the Preslav court. Traces of Sarmato-Sibirian and Persian-Hellenistic art were to be seen in the work of Bulgarian artists for a long time to come. The linear and flat, but highly expressive style of the Coptic and Cappadocian masters remained valid for the Bulgarian artists because it was closer to their taste and more readily comprehensible to them. This explains clearly enough the preferences of the Bulgarian artists, who were making their first steps in the field of Christian painting.

A certain amount of information on the development of the popular trend in painting during the 11th and 12th centuries is furnished by several half-ruined little churches in Macedonia. The first that should be mentioned are the greatly damaged murals on one of the central arches in the Church of St Vrachi in Kostur, with the figures of St Basil and St Nicholas (Fig. 2). Their elongated proportions, emphasized by a firm and laconic line, create a true to life monumen-

tal effect. Their wide open eyes with a tense and stern expression, resemble the mosaic figures of the donors in the Church of St Dimiter in Salonika, and the apostles painted on the southern wall of the Church of St Luke in Phocis built in the 11th century. They also have something in common with the portrait of Abraham seen in a small Coptic icon from the church in Bawît and referred to the beginning of the 7th century (Figs. 3, 4). All these parallels convincingly show the influence of Eastern Early Byzantine art on Balkan artists. In Macedonia in the 11th century, as in Preslav in the 10th century, official art could not remain entirely unaffected by the influence of popular tastes. A mural fragment in the church at the village of Vodocha, near Strumitsa, is a case in point. It depicts the feat of the Forty Martyrs, with remarkable freedom and a warm feeling of compassion for human suffering. Drawing on his emotions rather than on his experience, the artist has found the most direct path to the heart of the spectator, introducing a realistic element in the didactic and symbolic content of his subject.

During the 11th and 12th centuries, after long quests and returns to the artistic standards of antiquity, the great style of painting of Christian art, now known as the Comnenian style, began to crystallize in Constantinople. The final triumph of feudal relations in Byzantine society raised even higher the authority and political importance of the ecclesiastical institutions. A new ideal of beauty, which drew men's eyes solely and entirely to heaven, prevailed in art. A spirit of asceticism and contemplation developed in the monasteries and hermits' dwellings, found expression in the painting of ethereal figures, deprived of substance, which seem to have been born in the morbid imagination of an ecstatic anchoret. The chief means of expression is the line. The artists used it to delineate the faces and the anatomical details. It is used in drawing the elongated ovals of the faces, the straight and narrow noses, the high furrowed foreheads, the wide-open almond-shaped eyes, the thin and somewhat sinister hands whose gestures seem to have a peculiar magic conjuring force. The exaggerated monumental quality in the figures of Christ and the Virgin placed an insurmountable barrier between the divine sovereigns and the earthly feelings of their worshippers. The pictorial methods of Eastern painting are, in this case also, used as a structural element. Emptied of its popular democratic content, however, they served different, essentially anti-democratic purposes. During that period the differences between official painting and the popular-democratic trend in art become still more marked. While the Constantinople masters worked out a new and most exquisite decorative system, in which a fine network of golden lines lent an ethereal quality to the figures, the popular master painted in crude lines, giving his figures a monumental aspect, but making them somewhat clumsy and dry. This quality of Bulgarian painting of that period convincingly shows the active part taken by the popular artist in the creation of that monumental style in Old Bulgarian painting, which was greatly refined in the 13th and 14th centuries to find its full expression and to create masterpieces such as the Boyana murals, the paintings in the Church of the Forty Martyrs in Turnovo, the murals in Berendé, and those in the church of the Zemen Monastery (Fig. 5).

Another impressive work of 13th century painting are the miniatures in the Gospel of Father Dobreisho, copied and illuminated during the reign of Tsar Ivan-Assen II in Northeastern Macedonia. Particularly interesting is the miniature depicting John the Gospeller, before whom one of the copyists, Father Dobreisho, kneels in prayer. The gospeller is painted sitting on a throne richly decorated with woodcarving, under three decorative arches, blessing with two hands Father Dobreisho, whose small figure is lost in the large and coarse monk's habit. The rigid but expressive attitudes of the figures, their extreme and conventional stylization, the large heads, the three-dimensional treatment of the faces with great almond-

shaped eyes, and particularly the bright decorative colour-scheme are all features of the spontaneous decorative and expressive style of popular art. The rather crude naivety and deep sincerity of these paintings rouse in the viewer associations with the stylistic features of the Sumerian, Accadian and Hittite art of antiquity, which no doubt form the basis of the whole Eastern manner of expression.

When discussing monumental painting on tombs belonging to this period, we should first of all consider the murals in the burial chapel in the village of Berendé near Sofia. The small church, dedicated to the apostles Sts Peter and Paul, was intended to meet the modest local needs, and the manner of painting used in its decoration reflects the taste and artistic ideas of the people. Art specialists still argue as to whether the murals were painted in the 13th or 14th century. A number of characteristic features, such as the emphatic graphical quality of the figures, the distribution of the subjects according to an already established scheme, the ridding of the composition from superfluous detail, and other peculiarities characteristic of the 14th century, are of a very pronounced historical interest. These same features contain elements of a tradition inherited from the Comnenian period, and mark one of the stages in the formation of the important style of painting in Old Bulgarian art which has already been mentioned[4] (Fig. 6).

The Berendé murals exhibit many elements of Eastern preiconoclastic art. The use of ornamental compositions as a background to some figures is essentially a local version of landscape motifs of an East Persian origin. On the other hand, the precise delineation of some of the figures recalls the Fayûm portraits. These facts cannot be considered as curious and chance exceptions. They are equal components in the general conception of the ensemble of mural paintings.[5] These murals represent a logical conclusion of the development of the popular trend in medieval Bulgarian painting (Fig. 7). They have their sources in the old local tradition, enriched by the experience accumulated in the days of the first Bulgarian Kingdom. The graphic elements in these murals can be traced back to the style of the Comnenian art rather than of the Palaeologan, which did not reach maturity before the second half of the 14th century. The extraordinary wealth of colours of the Berendé murals is a remarkable fact and a foreshadowing of what was later to be brilliantly manifested in the work of the masters of the Turnovo school.[6]

The last century of free development of Old Bulgarian painting produced one of the most important works of popular or folk art — the murals of the Zemen Monastery chapel. In their style they are different from the Byzantine and Bulgarian works of court painting.[7] Their painter must have had a great and original talent in which the traditions of folk art find a new brilliant expression. The emphatically graphic quality of the figures lends a particular straightforwardness and conviction to this art. The figures, painted in full face, are static and monumental (Fig. 8). The symmetry in the composition of the Zemen murals recalls the work of the old Eastern masters, who left behind them such relics as the murals in the rock-cut churches at Kilicilar Kilisse, Abihenis and Tokaly in the interior of Asia Minor, the old Cappadocia.[8] True to local tradition, the Zemen master arranged the figures in an archaic but widely used compositional manner. He painted several full-length figures in the foreground, and behind them only the faces, the pates or the nimbuses of the other members of the group. The clumsy attitudes of the figures again recall the Eastern art of the preiconoclastic period, and that points to the sources from which the artist drew in his work (Fig. 9).

His spacing best reveals the naive and original manner of his painting. The perspective in his compositions is in the greater number of cases inverted or confused, but the original distribution of the figures gives an impression of a proper understanding of the problem of spacing and reveals a desire on his part

to solve it convincingly. The firm and categoric line is the main means of expression and the artist uses it to render anatomical and facial details. The folds in the garments are painted so flat that they register as ornaments rather than as attempts at modelling. The landscapes usually consist of uniform low hills, the foot of which starts in the foreground, terminating on top in a mound of rocks cut in the form of steps. This type of landscape is characteristic of Palaeologan art, from which it was obviously borrowed by our master. The interests of the Zemen artist were mainly concentrated on the human figure and it is here that he made his chief discoveries. The faces he paints are always animated by eyes with profoundly human expression, and this fact characterizes him as a good observer and psychologist (Fig. 11). The rhythm of the compositions is achieved through the repetition of certain gestures and attitudes in a manner at once simple and convincing. The artist's flair for realism turns some of the compositions into genre scenes, as is the case with the scenes depicting the forging of the nails for Christ's crucifixion or the casting of lots for Christ's garments.[9]

From the point of view of style the murals in the Zemen chapel are an anachronism in the period when they were painted. This is a monument of folk art, with an integrity of spirit and execution, which on comparison with other monuments of the period, proves to be the product of that popular and archaist trend which found its ideological inspiration and artistic models in the art of Syria and Cappadocia of the preiconoclastic period.[10] Parallels for the stylistic features of the Zemen murals can be found in the traces of murals in the ruined church near the village of Lyutibrod, Vratsa district, the murals in the Church of St John by the sea in Nessebur, those in the Church of St Nicholas near the town of Prilep, or in the church of Panaya Velas in Epirus, all built at the end of the 13th or the beginning of the 14th century (Fig. 12).

The murals in the half-ruined church near the village of Kalotino, Sofia district, show a close stylistic resemblance to the murals of the Zemen Church. The small basilica church dedicated to St Nicholas was reconstructed in the 15th century and we can judge about the original murals only by what has been preserved in the narthex. Following the tradition established during the 13th and 14th centuries, the unknown master has distributed the figures in horizontal bands, painting in full-length nuns and saints in the bottom row. Next to them, on the northern wall, he has painted the donors, and on the vaults he has depicted ten scenes of the life of St Nicholas. Up to the end of the '30s of this century, an inscription was visible in the narthex of the church, showing that it was built during the reign of Ivan Alexander, i. e. the middle of the 14th century.[11] Here as in Zemen, the life scenes are developed in continuous friezes, and the gallery of popular characters has been supplemented by figures depicted with large close-shaven heads. The contour line is again the main means of expression in the rendering of figures and faces. The modelling of faces and arms is barely hinted at with pale yellowish tints which predominate in the colour scheme of these murals. The predilection of the artist for the decorative and realistic detail, particularly in painting garments, is a clear indication of his taste, developed in the spirit of the expressive realism of the preiconoclastic period. An important testimony to the ancient date of the sources used by the artist is the manner in which the inscriptions have been executed. As in the Zemen murals, these are white rectangular areas imitating the special boards (the so-called titula) which were used for the same purpose in Roman art. A similar feature is observed in the Ravenna mosaics of the time of Justinian the Great. This is another proof of the genetic links of Christian painting with the Greek and Roman culture of antiquity.

An interesting monument which illustrates the style variety of 14th century Bulgarian art are the murals in the small half-ruined church of St Theodore Stra-

tilates at the village of Boboshevo, Kyustendil district. Of all monuments of Bulgarian folk art, this one shows most clearly the fusion of architecture with painting. Following the canonic scheme for distribution of subjects, the artist has painted in the dome, now non-existent, the image of Christ, along the drum, the figures of the prophets, in the pendantives, those of the four gospellers, and in the four vaults, the figures of the archangels Michael, Gabriel, Raphael and Oriel. The scenes of the passions of God and the figures of various other saints are placed in the same vaults. The partial overlapping of the horizontal friezes, which start from the southern wall in the eastern arm of the cross in that domed-cross type church and end in the northern wall of the same arm, shows that the second layer of murals, in which we are interested, have been started from the dome down and continued on the vaults and the walls. Although they have suffered much from exposure, the following figures and parts of compositions can be discerned: The Raising of Lazarus, The Nativity, The Presentation, The Baptism, The Transfiguration, The Crucifixion, The Ascension and The Resurrection, The Last Supper, The Washing of the Apostles' Feet, The Mount of Olives, Judas' Kiss, The Denial and Repentance of Peter, The Judgement of Pilate, The Repentance and Death of Judas. The symbolic scene Veneration of the Holy Sacrifice and the figures of the church fathers are depicted in the apse. In The Nativity, a curious detail attracts the attention: an angel riding a horse is depicted in the upper end of the composition (Fig. 13). Though such figures are met with in some early paintings of the Italian Renaissance, they are derived from East Christian iconography and are extremely rare in Byzantine works. The celestial rider or riders in The Nativity scene may be seen in the murals of a number of Eastern monuments, such as Karanlik, Karabak-kilisse, Ceraklii and Tokaly, all in Asia Minor, and only as an exception in the murals of the Church of St Luke in Phocis, Greece.[12]

If we look for parallels of this feature in miniatures, again we find them in Eastern relics, such as the London Psalter and the Parma Tetraevangelia, but nowhere in Byzantine illuminated manuscripts. Characteristic of the same scene in Syrian-Cappadocian iconography are the figures of the shepherds, particularly that of the shepherd playing a pipe. His figure is encountered in practically all monuments in Asia Minor and is very rarely met with in Byzantine monuments. There is reason to maintain that this Cappadocian character of The Nativity in Balkan art has been preserved as a harking back to the preiconoclastic period, rather than as a product of later influences. However, in Bulgaria it underwent some changes, being supplemented by a number of realistic and folklore details. The Baptism composition offers an analogous case. In it Christ is depicted standing on a stone in the Jordan River. A many-headed snake, symbolizing conquered evil, is pressed under the stone. Some Macedonian murals painted at the same time give the exact parallel of this detail, but they all reproduce the old Cappadocian model.[13]

The artist's psychological insight and feeling for monumental effects are particularly evident in the portrait of the Virgin in the Resurrection scene. Mary's figure, imperial in bearing, is full of movement, which emphasizes the solemnly symbolic character of the subject. Her face is filled with a warm human and purely earthly feeling, without, however, lacking in exalted grandeur (Fig. 14). The pressed lips, large eyes and light modelling animate the face, while the soft draping of the garments adds a monumental effect to the figure. With these qualities the portrait of the Virgin in the Resurrection scene, painted in the Church of St Theodore Stratilates at Boboshevo, evokes associations with the Hellenistic painting tradition and is strongly reminiscent of another picture of the Virgin in a 6th century icon, found in the Monastery of St Catherine, Sinai.

The artist's skill in the rational use of space and

wall surfaces is evident in the building of compositions and their separation from one another without the use of frames which would cut up the field of vision. This shows his flair for decoration and his desire to preserve the architectural unity of the monument. The well-proportioned human figures relieve the compositions from superfluous detail and preserve the plastic freedom of the images. The tradition of simplifying the composition to the maximum and concentrating on the main figures, inherited from Comnenian art, has been conformed with in this case. In simplifying the forms to the utmost, the artist often touches on the grotesque. But even this fact shows the ancient roots of his art, which grew on the soil of the Greek and Roman artistic tradition and Early Christian expressionism (Fig. 15). A remarkable colourist, the Boboshevo master models his figures softly, with a rich scale of nuances and inobtrusive transitions. The awkward naivety of his portraits is sharply opposed to the idealized beauty and symbolic quality of the figures produced by court painters. The archaic features of his art reveal the role of the ascetic East in the building up of the spiritual culture of the Bulgarian people under feudal conditions. The Boboshevo master belonged to the group of artists who introduced the Byzantine style of painting in popular art. They tried to even out the sharper distinctions between the two trends of development of Bulgarian medieval painting. The living traditions of the Comnenian art are felt in the style of the Boboshevo master. His work fills one of the gaps in the scheme according to which we are trying to reconstruct the picture of artistic life in medieval Bulgaria. In the historical development of the popular trend in painting, a tendency was observed from a closer contact with life to a critical reconsideration of official dogmas and to emphasizing human virtues as a concrete manifestation of the human personality. These tendencies led to the formation of various trends which occasioned an exceptional variety of styles, and this situation was preserved till later times. The phenomenon can be explained solely by the great vitality of Bulgarian culture and the complex historical conditions under which our art developed.

The sharpening of class contradictions during the 13th and 14th centuries revolutionized the people, at the same time giving birth to various heretical doctrines, whose social causes were obvious. This left an imprint on the culture and the art of the Bulgarian people during the period. Apocryphal literature and Bogomil legends were set against the literature of the court and the nobility, which exhibited strong Byzantine influence. The works of the painters of the capital with their Palaeologan borrowings were opposed by the archaist primitive popular painting. This was essentially a conflict of two outlooks, which the church was unable to reconcile for all its high prestige, thus becoming the butt of fierce attacks. To the anathemas and public castigation inflicted on the Bogomil prophets they answered by trampling on icons, fleeing to the mountains or setting themselves on fire. The social awareness of artists also grew sharper. The popular masters gave their saints the characteristics of either lords or popular heroes. The spreading of the fame of St John of Rila was a case in point. His name became a synonym of the struggle against the oppressors. Even the official authorities tried to use his fame to strengthen their prestige which had been considerably shaken.

At the end of the 14th century came the denouement. The Second Bulgarian Kingdom, corroded by internecine struggles and contradictions, fell under the blows of the Ottoman aggressors. Against the gloomy background of bloody massacres and destruction died a civilization which had reached its zenith a mere 30 or 40 years before. It was a culture that under the unquestioned domination of the medieval religious outlook, created conditions for the development of philosophical rationalism which found expression in the doctrine of the monk Akindin. It had a tho-

roughly new understanding of the human personality and it perpetuated the humanism of the popular art as the basis of its entire historical development. The agony was long and painful. It could be seen in the fighters' desperate refusal to accept calmly the fate of slaves, it sounded in the proud words of our scholars, exiled in foreign lands. Fleeing from the yataghan of the invaders, they sought refuge in the neighbouring lands, but there felt as teachers of those peoples among whom circumstances had induced them to work.

The painting of that period was characterized by a strengthening of democratic tendencies, combined with the rich experience of the past and the patriotic pathos of the continued unequal struggle. This led our artists to new discoveries, to changes in people's consciousness and tastes. None of this, however, was in a position to shake the authority of the old Christian outlook, which under the domination of a community of a different religion, acquired the importance of a distinctive national feature (Fig. 16).

The period embracing the end of the 14th and the first half of the 15th century was filled with the Bulgarians' dramatic struggle against the invaders. To the west and north, the Ottomans were stopped by the Serbian princes and Wallachian chieftains. To the east Constantinople, though surrounded on all sides, still bravely defended its independence. Through the efforts of Vladislav III, the young King of Poland and Hungary, Europe tried to organize a coalition against Ottoman aggression. The insurrection headed by Scanderbeg barred the invaders' inroads into Albania till as late as 1468. All this roused mad hopes among the Bulgarians, and they waited for the opportune moment to take up arms again. The tragedy was drawing to an end, the banner with the crescent was waving triumphantly over Europe, but the Bulgarian people would not admit defeat. The intensive church construction during the second half of the 15th century was a brilliant demonstration of national intransigence and hatred for the enemy.

The changes which had occurred in the Bulgarians' life found reflexion in painting. The factors that were to govern the future development of Bulgarian art were already apparent. In the first place, the difference between court and popular painting seemed to disappear. Naturally the discoveries and the skills of the old masters were not forgotten at once, but the destruction of the great art centres and especially of the capital, Turnovo, deprived our art of a central, directing influence. The consolidation of surviving forces in some peripheral regions such as the town of Nessebur, for instance, has many of the characteristics of provincial art. The old iconographical formulas became unproductive because of the lack of a developing theory behind them. Diversity of style and local limitations became a constant companion in the later history of Bulgarian late medieval painting.

The church, which formally kept all its privileges and should have set the trend in the development of art, was in no position to overcome the crisis of ideas, caused by its loss of power. Its intellectual élite had long since scattered and had become practically non-existent. The victory of hesychasm during the second half of the 14th century meant nipping in the bud a potential development which would eventually have led Bulgarian Orthodox art to the ideas of the Italian Renaissance. The late Byzantine and Balkan painting was essentially trite and schematic, impoverished by the scarcity of new ideas and aesthetic conceptions.[14] All this led Bulgarian painting to decline, slowly but inevitably, and it had to constantly make concessions to popular-democratic conceptions, to the Eastern decorative tendencies which had penetrated the Balkans with a new force, to the Italian provincial influences which made their way through the island of Crete. Though they had borrowed some elements from the pictorial methods of the Quattrocento, these South Italian and

Greek influences had nothing of the stern realism of Masaccio and Mantegna, of the quiet sadness of Botticelli, of Donatello's heroic pathos, of the intimacy of Ghirlandaio and the wisdom of Leonardo.[15] No matter how different conditions in the Balkans were from those in Italy, no matter how deep the crisis in the old Byzantine aestheticism, Balkan art never slowed its upward development. Bulgarian paintings of that eventful period exhibit a marked tendency towards breaking the shackles of traditional ideas, towards including new elements in the range of subjects and giving more attention to life. These invigorating influences derived from the popular tastes and outlook. They were a product of democratization in art, in which the vitality and realism of the old Christian East were mingled with the sensuality and keenness of observation of the popular master. They were a product of a new understanding of the individuality of the artist who, urged by various motives, tried to give a profound und convincing expression of the sad fate of his people.

In 1476 the Sofia boyar Radoslav Mavur helped with some money in the reconstruction of the church in the Monastery of Our Lady of Vitosha near the village of Dragalevtsi, Sofia district. The monastery was founded during the reign of Tsar Ivan Alexander, but was later destroyed by the Ottomans. The murals, which were painted in the 15th century, are best seen in the narthex of the church. The wall surfaces from the top of the vault to the bottom are divided into horizontal bands, filled with portraits of prophets, Gospel scenes, figures of saints in full length and medallions with the faces of martyrs. There is a clear tendency here to replacing historical and narrative subjects by prayerful and strictly hieratic representations of saints and compositions of a religious-dogmatic character.

This phenomenon, which was observed in the late 14th century, became particularly characteristic of the 15th and 16th centuries. It is an expression of the increased tendency to mysticism introduced into art and culture by the new conditions of life of the Bulgarian people. Life in the monasteries, which were the only centres of culture, left its imprint on Bulgarian painting of the late medieval period. In the murals of the Dragalevtsi church, even the cycle of Christ was represented only by those scenes which are the most important from the point of view of Christian dogma.[16] What immediately leaps to the eye is the artist's pathos, which is expressed in even the smallest detail. The figures are remarkable for their rich emotionality, expressed with the oddities and naivety of the primitives. They reflect the outlook of the folk master, who intermingled mythological personages with Biblical symbols and with his own experience of life. Many of the figures are disproportionate and extremely stylized, but they nevertheless have a profound and convincing impact on the viewer. Obviously the murals are the work of a great talent, executed with the sincerity and immediacy of his rich and sensitive soul.

'Through the deformation and stylization the artist expresses his conception of things, and attains a special life-like effect in depicting the personages in a manner all his own.' The refined feeling for colour, the high professional skill and the emotional attitude to figures and subjects are here blended with the primitive naivety in a way that was never repeated except in several interesting icons.[17] The portraits of the donors best illustrate this point. Radoslav Mavur, his wife Vida and his two sons Stapia and Nikola Glamatik are painted with particular care and are especially well individualized (Fig. 17).

These portraits are a great artistic achievement not only for the painter of the murals in the Dragalevtsi church, but for the whole of late medieval Bulgarian painting. An interesting fact which comes to light in the inspection of the murals is the artist's reference to personifications and other features characteristic of ancient art, although they are in this case given a new rendering closer to the popular spirit. For instance, in the large composition of the Last

Judgement, painted in the upper part of the vault in the narthex, there are four men's figures with antique Phrygian hats, personifying the winds. In the scene of the Resurrection of the Dead the earth is represented as a winged woman's figure with a flowing scarf in her hands.[18] An inscription over the entrance of the nave painted on the inside, gives us ground to conclude that those murals of extraordinary importance were the work of the monk Antonii.[19]
The Dragalevtsi murals show a certain resemblance to the murals in the church of the Monastery of St Dimiter near the village of Boboshevo, painted in 1488 by the monk Neofit and his sons Dimiter and Bogdan. Here again, we meet with the familiar scheme of composition, with continuous friezes of waist-length figures of saints, prophets and martyrs. In this case, also, the composition is free from superfluous accessories and personages. The main means of expression is again the line, which not only delineates the contours of the figures but all details of their anatomy and draperies. Again we come across the extreme stylization, verging on the grotesque, dictated by the spontaneous feeling of the artist rather than by any formal style requirements. Archaist treatment and primitivism are even more fully manifested here. They are a hint of the polarization of styles that was to occur later, in the 15th and 16th centuries, and once more draw the dividing line between the refined art of the town and monastery churches and the cruder style of painting in the villages.
The nature and importance of 15th century painting are illustrated by another two monuments, which show the appearance of some new problems in Old Bulgarian art. They are the murals in the Church of St George near the village of Kremikovtsi, Sofia district, and those in the chapel of St John the Theologian in the Poganovo Monastery, now in Yugoslavia.
The murals in the Kremikovtsi church, dated to 1493, betray an even higher analytical stage of the mind and emotions of the artists. They reveal a striving towards a wider scope in the use of the means of expressions and the ideas treated, and a greater refinement of the narrative, although in this case too impressions from life often destroy the rigidity of Byzantine formulas. The monumental quality and psychological depth of some of the portraits, the narrative and decorative elaboration of the com positions, the heightened interest in realistic detail and in a multi-plan arrangement of the figures, combine to create an impression of strong vitality and pathos of the pictorial narrative. The realistic appearance of the representations, the wealth of costumes, ornaments, weapons, show the extraordinary powers of observation of the artists (Fig. 18).
The recent closer investigation into the murals of the Kremikovtsi church has led to new interesting discoveries. Attention was drawn to several barely legible letters, painted on the ringmail of St Theodore Stratilates and St Theodore Tyron. The inscription on the ringmail of the former proved to contain the name Stoyan, and when the figure of the Virgin was cleaned, the inscription 'Remember Oh Lord the monk Antonii' was discovered below her right arm. It may be supposed that those are the names of two of the icon-painters who worked in the church, and the Antonii mentioned here might be the same person who worked in the Dragalevtsi church. [0]
The murals in the Kremikovtsi church also reveal a new attitude of the painters to the architectural background. The two-dimensional wings disappear from their compositions. The well-spaced interior, built over a clearly delineated terrain, has more substance than anything else that the Middle Ages have so far to offer. Obviously there are new achievements of Old Bulgarian painting, which became possible thanks to the artists' growing skill, their new attitude to the world and its problems, to the new demands that life imposed upon them.
In fact it would be wrong to imagine the Bulgarian people of that time isolated from the rest of the world. The unification of Asia Minor, Syria, Egypt, the

Caucasian region and Southeastern Europe within the borders of the Ottoman Empire created favourable conditions for mutual influences and enriched the range of subjects painted by our artists. Contacts with Western Europe and Italy, too, were anything but casual. The vassal Serbian principalities and Wallachian communities involved in the struggle of the Hungarian kings against the Ottomans, became channels of European influence penetrating into Bulgaria. Another circumstance that should not be overlooked is the fact that the merchants from Genoa, Venice and Dubrovnik retained their old privileges under the power of the sultan. They enjoyed a great measure of freedom in exchange of the favours they did to the Turks. Various European missions on their way to the Turkish capital also passed through Bulgaria during the 15th and 16th centuries. Travellers and adventurers, attracted by the exoticism and fabulous wealth of the East, also crossed the country. The Catholic church tried to spread its influence over the Bulgarians and began to show a lively interest in their lot. Against this historical background the new phenomena which were to be observed in painting acquire a plausible and indeed natural explanation. The fact that certain elements, which appeared under the influence of the Italian Renaissance, and were manifest in our 15th century painting, later faded away, is to be accounted for by the socio-economic development of our people, who were to labour under a system of feudal relations for three more centuries, with Bulgarian art barely surviving under the severe tutorship of ecclesiastical institutions. The composition The Birth of the Virgin in the Kremikovtsi murals is highly characteristic of 15th century Bulgarian painting. Evident here is an interest in the principles which dominated easel-painting in the early Renaissance: there is an approach to what today is called unity of the time and place of action, a gradual grouping of characters around a single centre, motivation of their actions and behaviour by motifs of life, drawing of characters in their interrelations, optical authenticity in the placing of objects.[21] The insight and ease of the artist in portraying at the same time the psychological and social characteristics of some of his figures are remarkable. Thus, the servant girl who gives the mother her food in this scene is depicted as a very ordinary plump-cheeked girl, without any particular intellectual qualities, doing her duty with considerable ease. Apparently the artist used his own judgement in rendering the figures set by the iconographical scheme. He sought his own answer to many questions put to him by his imagination, by his experience of life and rich sensibility. He was an artist who applied in a fresh way the best in the traditions of popular art, a man who knew how to poeticize reality, a man of high artistic skill who was thoroughly at home with his material.

These new features of Bulgarian religious painting in the 15th century are even better seen in the murals in the church of the Poganovo Monastery. These murals, painted in 1500, closely resemble the murals in the Kremikovtsi church in their treatment, colour scheme and painting technique. They can be best described in André Grabar's words: 'What is new in them is that they show a careful accumulation of Western forms on a Byzantine basis, in conformity with the art history and the traditions of Old Bulgarian art'.[22] Subjects that have a predominantly symbolical meaning are treated here along with the traditional subjects. Examples of these are: The Divine Liturgy, in which Christ is in his role of supreme head of the church. The Wisdom of Gregory the Theologian, where the church fathers, together with the nations, are represented striving towards the divine sources, the composition Veneration of the Holy Sacrifice — all illustrative of the growing place of mysticism and theological symbolism in the art of the Balkan nations of that period. The artist's treatment of space is quite striking. He builds his compositions in space, tries to use real sources of light, uses highlights and strong shadows

to model his objects. All this gives a certain reality to his landscape and links together the individual parts of the composition. A new treatment is also given to figures. The variety of types and costumes and the freedom of attitudes and gestures are indeed amazing. The master likes crowded scenes and has a keen eye for realistic detail. All this makes his narrative illustrative but also plastic. The small squares of the separate scenes with their rich scale of colours create in the viewer an impression of exotic exuberance and decorative variety.

Another monument illustrating the variety and fulness of the Bulgarians' artistic life in the 15th century are the partially preserved murals of the Orlitsa Cloister in the Rila Monastery. They were painted slightly earlier than the Poganovo murals, in 1491. The scenes of the Resurrection, Dormition and Transfiguration (Fig. 19) are preserved along the western wall of the church dedicated to the apostles Sts Peter and Paul in that cloister. The Pentecost, the Doubting Thomas, and The Annunciation scenes can be discerned on the southern wall, while the Virgin Orans accompanied by archangels and prophets, is painted in the altar (Fig. 20).

The murals in the Orlitsa Cloister are particularly valuable as an illustration of the historical continuity in artistic conceptions and style of the earlier period, and the new trends which developed during the late Middle Ages. They offer a new and rare interpretation of many figures, such as that of Archangel Gabriel in the scene of the Annunciation, a new simplified version of the composition the Doubting Thomas. The iconography, style and colour scheme of the unknown master who worked here betray some elements of old Eastern art, supplemented by the methods and compositional solution of the traditional Byzantine painting in its popular interpretations, evolved, it should be noted, on a basis common to the whole Balkan area. Many iconographical details, whose origin derives from Cappadocian and Palestinian models, are here supplemented by gestures and attitudes which had become characteristic of the Byzantine capital.[23]

The elements of primitivism apparent here do not yet lead to a vulgarization of artistic conceptions, which shows that even during the troubled years of early Ottoman domination Bulgarian art did not lose its independence, that the experience and traditions which had been handed down by the older generation were not forgotten and that drawing on these traditions, Bulgarian painting was still in a position to enrich its range of subject and to stimulate the activity of the surviving art centres. Showing a close stylistic resemblance to the court art of the previous century, the murals in Orlitsa reveal th vast range of the changes which had occurred in Bulgarian art. These changes had come as a result of the democratization in art and of the awakening of strong patriotic feelings among the Bulgarian people, who wished to defend and preserve the originality of their culture.

The mural paintings selected for consideration above clearly show the richness of style in Bulgarian painting during that first century of Ottoman domination. They reveal the changes which had occurred in the people's life and way of thinking, and show that in spite of the existing tendencies to obliterate the differences between the two trends in art, these continued to exist. The wide difference that is perceived in comparing the style of the murals of the metropolitan Church of Sts Peter and Paul in Turnovo and the murals of the St Dimiter Monastery in Boboshevo is due not only to the different abilities of the artists, but also to their differing attitudes to the problems treated.

The growing tendency towards mysticism in the art of that period has been already mentioned in the foregoing paragraphs. This can easily be explained by the tremendous role played by the monasteries in Bulgarian life. First among those were the monasteries of Mount Athos. Closed to the infidels, they were the only place where the construction of large

churches was still possible. In them the artists were able to show the monumental quality of their art. In the 16th century began a large-scale renovation of murals in the churches, chapels and dining-halls of the monasteries in Mount Athos. In 1537 the celebrated master Manuil Panselinos painted the church of Milovokilissi in Karea, in which was the seat of its council.* In 1540 Theophanes of Crete repainted the cathedral in Anastasius Lavra. At the same time the dining room of the Stavronikita Monastery was decorated with murals.[24]

There was no independent school of painting in Mount Athos before the end of the 18th century. Yet the ideas of the Athonite monks greatly influenced the work of icon-painters. Some compositions became enriched by additions to the lives of saints which were peculiar to Mount Athos. The iconography was en larged by the addition of new subjects drawn from local legends describing religious miracles. The Athonite theologians revised the whole stock of subjects and methods of painting. Zealously guarding the purity of the Byzantine tradition, they opposed all attempts at new, realistic or rationalist interpretations. And finally, Mount Athos served as a gathering centre, a place where all famed masters of the Eastern Orthodox world got together, where the most representational and most 'devout' works of Orthodox art were created. Painters from the Island of Crete, from Janina, from Betika, from Kartipo in Bulgaria and Galichnik in Macedonia went there. The Bulgarians, drawing on their age-old traditions, produced an art different from the Greek.'[25]

The passion of the Bulgarian masters for painting was a strange and inexplicable thing. With manuals of painting in the folds of their garments, they traversed the Balkans and the neighbouring lands. Running a thousand risks, they sought some newly-built little church, half-buried in the ground or tucked away in the mountains, to brighten it with their inspired art. It was certainly more than the necessity to earn their daily bread that stirred them to such admirable deeds. They were clearly aware that they were exponents of the desire of their people to guard their culture from the discrimination and the encroachments of the enemy. Those devoted militants did their work unassumingly but with an amazing perseverance verging on fanaticism. This was indeed the only way in which it was possible to oppose the all-out offensive and religious fervour of their conquerors. It is interesting to note that precisely at that time the style characteristics of the Eastern preiconoclastic painting were again enhanced as if they had been resurrected. New types of faces, with clearly pronounced Turkic and Semitic features, appeared on Bulgarian murals and icons. The desire of our masters to render every interesting detail and new form lent these figures a strange, exotic or folklore appearance. This fact has led some art specialists to speak of a period of denationalization in Old Bulgarian art.[26] While one should not rush to wrong conclusions on what might appear to be scanty evidence, one could say with fair certainty that this phenomenon is a highly significant fact. It reflects one of the stages in the establishment of the predominance of the popular artistic conception in the formation of Bulgarian late medieval art. These new Eastern types were rendered by the Bulgarian artists in a conventional and emphatically graphic manner, and given an odd, forbidding and gloomy appearance. In many cases the gestures and expressive signs are overdone to the point of absurdity, thus acquiring an Oriental ceremonial quality, which is reminiscent of the Persian miniatures of the same period. The enrichment of the subject matter with new themes and personages, imposed by the necessity to depict various local legends and events to suit the taste of the employers, opened up great possibilities of introducing further genre elements in painting. The iconography of Bul-

* The general council of the monasteries on Mount Áthos, which was the supreme administrative body of the Athonite monastic republic.

garian icons and murals was thus rendered highly unstable. This was the natural medium in which the popular primitive developed and became established. During the 16th and 17th centuries the polarization of official and popular painting was even more pronounced and definite. It is clearly expressed in a number of monuments, such as the murals in the Voukovo churches, in the village of Dobursko, in the Alin Monastery and elsewhere.

The popular master's folklore attitude to certain figures and scenes made him change the accepted composition in his own characterizations and express his personal attitude to the religious and symbolic meaning of some subjects. Many of the life scenes in the icons illustrate the point. They surround the central subject and form a naive pictorial narrative. The naivety of many of the figures painted at that time makes them even more interesting because of the information they supply. They indicate the existence of a specific popular aesthetics which had not yet expressed itself in a definite artistic programme, though it contained the elements of a spontaneous popular revolt agaist the traditional conceptions and the outdated medieval dogmas. But as soon as we compare the murals of Patouh, Balsha, Malo Malovo, the Seslav, Podgoumer, Breznik and Alin monasteries with the refined art of the Bachkovo Monastery or the Church of St Stephen in Nessebur, the change which had occurred in painting after the 15th century becomes immediately apparent.

Not only had the polarization of the two trends reached an extreme degree, but the dry schematization in the style of the popular master had become painfully apparent. The end had come of the great fresco art which had been evolved by such distinguished masters as the painter of the murals in the Church of Sts Peter and Paul in Turnovo, the Poganovo artist and the celebrated Greek icon painters Andronicus the Byzantian, Fralgo Castellano, Teophanes of Crete, and Marco of Iver.[27] A certain impoverishment of perception, a flagging of poetic power, were felt in addition to the varied abilities of the artists, whose works had been robbed of much of their former conviction and psychological insight by the repetition of old iconographical schemes. Popular painting was gravitating towards an extreme primitivism and gradually assuming the features of an unpretentious peasant art. Naturally, there is no question of complete decline and degradation, for the professional skill of the artists, their ability to draw from life in their invention and the presence of still existing traditions made it possible to maintain a relatively high artistic standard (Fig. 21).

The political events on the Bulgarian scene at the time provide a convincing explanation for this fact. The period of comparative security during the first half of the 16th century was followed by a policy of repression on the part of the Sultan's government against the Christian population of the Empire. The first military failures of the Ottomans gave hopes to the Bulgarian people, but fanned the brutality of the oppressors. A period of restiveness and bloodshed set in during the early 17th century, when Austria, and later Russia, in a series of successful wars, managed to drive the Ottomans out of Central Europe, Galicia, and the Western Ukraine. The Bulgarian insurrections in Chiprovtsi and Turnovo were drowned in blood. In the forcible islamization in the northern foothills of the Balkan Range over 259 churches and monasteries were destroyed, and in the islamization of the Bulgarians in the Chepino area, 218 churches and 33 monasteries were razed to the ground.[28]

Clearly under such circumstances the possibilities of art work were highly limited. The tragic and gloomy resolve emanating from some portraits painted at the time are entirely in harmony with the joyless fate of the oppressed Bulgarians at the time. The ban on the building and repair of churches, which had been imposed on the Bulgarians in the 16th century by the Sultans Selim and Suleiman were actually still in force in the 19th century. It took great courage and self-sacrifice on the part of our ancestors to re-

construct or build a church, be it ever so small. The fact that quite a number of monuments which have been preserved to this day, date back to that particular eventful period, eloquently proves the people's resolve to preserve their national identity, and their fanatical devotion to Bulgarian culture. This gives the artists, donors and contributors of the time a place in the foremost ranks of the fighters for the preservation of the Bulgarian nation and its cultural traditions.

The intensive literary life in Bulgaria during the 16th and 17th centuries is also a significant fact. Writers and enlighteners were active in monasteries and towns. Their love for Bulgarian art, for their suffering fellow-men, produced a host of heroes and martyrs. It made of the legendary Rila monk Spiridon, who lived in the 15th century, a supplier of manuscripts for the flourishing capital of the Moldavian ruler Stephen the Great. It raised the humble priest Yoan of Kratovo, in the early 16th century, to the high status of a man of letters and illustrator, who made his mark in Bulgarian as well as Rumanian and Serbian art. It moved the Sofia writers Priest Peyo and Matei Lambadarii to write the lives of their fellow citizens Georgi, the goldsmith, and Nikola, the cobbler, who died a martyr's death at the hands of the frenzied Mohammedan mob.[29]

The features of Bulgarian popular painting discussed above were also expressed in the genre of the miniature. A festive Tetraevangelia, belonging to the church in the village of Trun, Vratsa district, may serve as an example. The flat treatment of the figures, delineated by means of hard contours and anatomical shapes rendered by memory, as well as the decorative flat colouring, show the primitivism of the artist, whose ability is below the average. The crude stylization of forms, the artist's ignorance of perspective, and his desire to rid the composition of architectural and landscape details reveal the characteristic preference of the popular master for archaist treatment and exaggerated expressiveness. The fact that the artist had painted John the Gospeller and his disciple Prohor in a very free composition, without the frame typical of the 16th century, shows that the traditions of the 14th century Bulgarian miniature painting still exerted some influence over that village master. The small bunch of flowers between the two figures suggests an influence from European book ornaments, which at that time began to penetrate into the Balkans through Rumanian manuscripts. These influences can also be discerned in the wide use of interlaced designs which, regardless of their rather complicated compositions, always contain some geometrical motif such as a cross or interconnected circles, which are also found in Scandinavian applied art.

In spite of the repressions of that troubled period, new churches and chapels began to be built in the towns and villages which were situated near monasteries. The churches in the villages of Voukovo, Pastouh, and Ruzhdavitsa, Kyustendil district, Krapets, near the town of Stanké Dimitrov, and Maritsa, Samokov district, date back to that time. The Alin, Karloukovo and Cherepish monasteries were also built during that period, as well as the Bilinski monastery, whose construction was helped by donations collected as far afield as Russia. In 1614 a group of village notables from Dobursko, Razlog district, on returning from a pilgrimage, decided to help with their money the painting of the Church of St Theodore Stratilates, newly erected near their village. The work of the painters Priest Dimiter from Salonika, Radé, Galo, and Priest Yossif who undertook the task, exhibits the elements of popular village primitivism. It is characterized by a predominance of decorative elements. It also shows the painters' extremely vague idea of the historical facts in the subjects they treated. But this art renders with stirring realism the painters' love of the people for whom it was intended. It reveals the workings of a thinking mind, of a rich imagination, which with the poetic means of the folk song perpetuated certain figures (Fig. 22).

Using the established method of distributing the compositions and figures, the artists painted a broad ornamental frieze of plant motifs, instead of the customary socle of draperies in the lowest part. The composition in which the two equestrian saints — Theodore Tyron and Theodore Stratilates — are represented, is also curious. It recalls the methods of Eastern art and particularly that of the Coptic monuments, in which the portraits of the riders are found everywhere, even in textile ornaments. In our case, however, it is not merely a matter of devotion to tradition. Very concrete patriotic feelings are embodied in these two proud figures. The same emotion has prompted the artists in the selection of personages, which include, among other saints, Gabriel Lesnovski, Joachim Ossogovski, Prohor Pshinski, the great Bulgarian enlightener St Clement of Ohrid, and the Sts Cyril and Methodius, the brothers who gave the Slavs their script. These are all figures which do not have their prototypes in Byzantine iconography.

From the point of view of style these murals can be regarded as a typical product of popular, peasant art. The artists have neither the courage nor the skill to depart from the conventional scheme for the distribution and interpretation of their subjects. The devitalization of the line, the schematization of the types, the increasing conventionality and naivety of composition, show a narrowing of horizons, caused by the lack of purpose and, above all, by the lack of that creative confidence which the 15th and 16th century masters possessed. The urge for personal expression and their innate realism prompts the 17th century masters to make timid attempts at changing the established iconography. They combine various thematic details in an unexpected and sometimes charmingly naive manner. If we scrutinize the figures in the Dobursko church more closely, we shall perceive that in spite of the masters' slighter talents, they show the traditional interest in the human character with its various states of mind and psychological experiences. The figures of the donors Hassia, Bogdan, Yerei, Hassia the son of Hassia, Stanko the son of Ougrin, Smilé the son of Velcho, and Spass the brother of Smilé, all grouped in a single portrait (Fig. 23), leave a profound impression on the mind of the viewer. Their faces, animated by eyes with a profoundly human expression, show not only Christian humility, but also their readiness to sacrifice themselves for the faith of their ancestors, which is associated in their minds with their national identity.

Two fragments of the murals in the already ruined church in the village of Krapets, Stanké Dimitrov district, illustrate an even more advanced stage of primitivism in 17th century popular painting (Fig. 24 and 25). The artist's drawing has here become thoroughly dry and rigid. The architectural background is entirely flat and conventional. The antique vellums which by some remote echo also seem to form a part of the work of that old master, look entirely unconvincing. His spacing is naive, too, in spite of his attempts to build the composition in depth. Yet the master has a wonderful feeling for movement. His compositions seem to emanate joy and exultation. The crude and disproportionate figures with big heads and large eyes are reminiscent of the style and decorative effect of the magnificent miniatures of the Gospel of Father Dobreisho, which were a product of the same type of artistic conception though in a much earlier period. The artist's psychological insight and keenness of observation are nowhere more evident than in the figure of St Mercurius (Fig. 26). The young and energetic face, animated by an ardent and resolute expression of the eyes, seems to represent the idealized image of the people's protector and fighter against the oppressors. It is a synonym of the courage and fortitude of the Bulgarians in the heavy trials of that time.

The development of Bulgarian medieval art and that of the Bulgarian 18th and 19th century National Revival can be traced in a series of icons, and their examination would add to the general impression of

the variety and richness of old Bulgarian painting. Before proceeding to inspect them, however, it will be necessary to explain some of their features which make them distinct from mural paintings. In the first place, the icon did not have such an important function in the decoration of the church as the mural paintings. The icons were relatively easy to transport, which increased the area of their distribution. This in turn created conditions more freely to borrow from various sources and even to copy the models. The polytheism which was rife during the 13th and 14th centuries gave rise to numerous local cults and caused the appearance of many 'miracle-working' icons, the fame of which outlived the time of their creation, and which remained for many years a model for imitation.

Icons were always produced in much larger numbers than murals during the period of Ottoman domination, since the ban over murals did not apply to them. During those difficult days of trial, the icon became a synonym of patriotism and the Bulgarian's constant companion in his daily life. It became 'an art of the people' to an extent almost equal to that of goldsmith's work and decorative fabrics. For these reasons, icon-painting has left a much richer gallery of examples. The devotion to the antique traditions, the activity of the various schools and art centres, the various outside influences, the development of the artistic ideas and tastes of the Bulgarian people — all these can be traced in the icons, those grand witnesses of our eventful history. The annex of the National Gallery in Sofia has a comparatively rich collection of late medieval icons and these can serve as a basis in summing up the facts of the development of old Bulgarian painting during that period. As a preliminary statement on the subjects of Bulgarian late medieval icon-painting it may be said that prayerful and hieratic figures predominate. At the same time the popular tastes and preferences find expression in the figures of warrior saints, sometimes turned into regular folklore heroes.

Because of the limited size of the painting area the compositions of the icons are free from crowded decor and superfluous characters. But they are sometimes supplemented by numerous scenes from life, which lend the artistic narrative a didactic character. The constantly rising interest in decorative and ornamental details in late medieval icons corresponds to the ebb of religious feeling among the people and the growing similarity of icons to easel-painting. Parallel with the development of the young Bulgarian nation during the period of the Bulgarian 18th and 19th century National Revival the icon fell into decline and gave its place to the developing secular art.

The first item that attracts attention in the above-mentioned collection is an altar door from the Poganovo Monastery, which is referred to 1620 (Fig. 27). Although the composition and the distribution of figures are nothing out of the ordinary, the door is remarkable for its rich decoration. The individual figures and the central scene are placed under oriental triple arches, supported by slender woodcarved pillars. The rich woodcarved ornaments lavishly gilt, which fill the free space around, betray the taste of the popular master, who preferred the plant ornament in a more naturalized form to the abstract interlaced design.

The centre is traditionally occupied by the scene of the Annunciation, in a composition almost entirely unencumbered by architectural decor. An exception is a sort of bench painted behind the Virgin, to suggest that when she was visited by the messenger of God, she was working in her room. The figures of the Virgin and Archangel Gabriel with unnaturally large heads and rigid gestures, show the artist's limited gifts. His efforts to beautify and animate the faces reveal that he had a very fine model from the 14th or 15th century. That model was in all probability either a miniature or an icon, for in spite of the uninspired drawing of our master, the plasticity and elegant movement of the copied original can be per-

ceived. The other figures are still cruder and more austere. In the upper part of the alter door the prophets Solomon and David are painted under a single arch. The artist has used the traditional types, though he has made the faces rather flat and expressionless. In the lower part, the full-length figures of St Basil, St John Chrysostom, St Gregory and St Athanasius the Great are depicted in the typical rigid iconographical attitudes. Though an individualization of the faces has been attempted, they remain schematized and expressionless, and the multi-coloured chequered phellonia merely intensify the effect of crude naivety. The general impression of gay and festive beauty left by the Poganovo altar door is mainly created by the lavish decoration effectively enhanced by gilding and paint. This monument illustrates the optimistic character of popular painting, and the emphatic priority of the decorative element points to one of its most characteristic features.

Another icon, on which St Gregory the Theologian, St John Chrysostom and St Basil the Great are painted, is most striking with its beautiful colour-scheme and festive mood (Fig. 28). The elongated figures of the saints, painted two-dimensionally, stand out imposingly against the gilt background and lend a monumental quality to the whole well-balanced composition. Painted full face and in identical attitudes, the figures of the three saints create a solemn, though somewhat restrained rhythm, also expressed in the slight movements of St. Gregory and St Basil in left- and right-hand corner respectively. The artist's vigorous and calligraphically precise drawing is remarkable. His economical, vertical lines give the figures a stately bearing which emphasizes their place in ecclesiastical hierarchy. Even the linear decorative manner of rendering the faces cannot detract from this effect. The hand of a great master, well versed in iconography and the theological requirements, is discernible here. The facial resemblance of the three, well camouflaged by the difference in hair and form of beard, does not rob the faces of their individuality and inner depth. These are three thinkers, three devout old men, who have grasped the 'divine truth' each in his own way. This icon is a complex psychological study executed entirely in the spirit of popular art. The master shows his preference for the decorative in the wealth of ornamental details in the draperies and nimbuses. If we attempt to pass a judgement on the artist even on the evidence of this icon alone, we should have to recognize in him an enviable knowledge of art and a feeling for balancing individual components. On the other hand, we cannot help noting a tendency to neglect the pictorial element and to replace it by excessive decorativeness, indicative of the taste of the artist and of those to whom his work was addressed. It is possible, however, that the whole matter might be much simpler than that. Perhaps the master had an old and very beautiful model, which he conscientiously tried to copy, failing, however, to ignore the tastes and views of his period.

The unknown master, who in 1685 painted an icon for the Turnovo Church of the Dormition of the Virgin, was also touching in his desire to follow traditional formulae without being acquainted with them in detail. The icon represents Christ as the supreme judge on the day of the last judgement, in a symbolic composition known as The Deesis (Fig. 29). The Virgin and St John the Baptist are depicted on his two sides, with their hands crossed in an attitude of supplication, interceding with the son of God for 'sinful mankind'. These two figures, as well as the apostles' portraits painted around the central group, enhance the narrative element in the whole composition. The linear decorative manner of the artist and his tendency to extreme stylization introduce into the composition the already familiar expressiveness of popular art. Christ's face is powerful and impressive. It is full of severity, nobility and kindness. The brownish carnation and white light falling in large spots create in it a tension which is emphasized by the clever, lively eyes. The unnaturally elongated fingers of the

hand raised in an attitude of blessing arrest the viewer's attention and emphasize the symbolic character of the gesture. The divine and the earthly are blended here with admirable ease, and this shows the artist's great professional skill and erudition. The complicated pseudo-baroque forms of the throne, which were new and obviously fascinating for the artist, show the naivety and simplicity of his conception. He paints Baroque volutes next to typical carpentry forms, traditional Byzantine cushions next to lavishly ornamented foot stools and luxurious upholstery with flower-patterned fabrics. In this mixture of reality and invention, he sees his ideal of lavish, royal magnificence, so that even the head-dresses of the village girls, decorated with beads and little mirrors, bear the likeness of kings' crowns. It should be added at once that he never lost his sense of proportion in the use of colours. The warm brownish colour ranges are balanced by the patches of blue and green on the himations of Christ and some other figures, thus creating a quiet and harmonious colour scheme. The frieze with flowers and plant motifs in the top of the icon shows the importance of the ornament in old Bulgarian art, which was to grow in the course of time (Fig. 30). Though it has been mentioned in other monographs, this icon has not so far been considered as a work marking a change in the principles of traditional official painting, which at that time came extremely close to the conceptions of popular art.[29]

Another work illustrating the increasingly decorative character of Bulgarian painting of that period is an icon from the Turnovo Church of the Virgin, dating to 1684. It depicts St George at the moment when he stabs the dragon (Fig. 31 and 32). According to the late iconography of the scene, behind the saint is depicted the son of the ruler of a Byzantine province in Asia Minor, who was held captive by the Bulgarians early in the 9th century and was saved in a 'miraculous' manner by St George. This anti-Bulgarian content of the scene was spread through the late Athonite version of the life of St George. The fact that it had penetrated into painting shows the blind faith in the authority of the Athonite theologians who in the meantime, seized by strong pan-Hellenistic feelings had started to play a far from favourable role in the religious life of the Balkan Slavs. The painstakingly rendered details of the central scene and the life scenes painted around it, show the desire of the artist to make his pictorial narrative detailed and interesting. The intense colour scheme of the icon, among which the red mantles of some of the figures appear as colour accents, the bold stylization of anatomical forms and the expressive gestures introduce dynamism into the composition and lend the subject a special importance and poetic inspiration.[30]

In another icon of the 17th century, also found in the Turnovo district, Archangel Michael is depicted in full length, with a sword raised above his head (Fig. 33). In an impressive and dramatic gesture, he raises his curved sword to deal the last fatal blow and wrest the soul of the dying sinner. In his outstretched left hand he holds a cross, a chalice and a scroll, in which the corresponding gospel text concerning the retribution of the Last Judgement is written in Greek. The dry straight line and the extreme stylization of forms, leave an impression of rigidity and angular clumsiness in that disproportionate figure. The face of the archangel is of a type widely popular at the time, in which the Eastern prototype — the symbol of ideal beauty — can easily be detected. This big head with linearly rendered details of the face with large almond-shaped eyes, arched knit eyebrows and a rigid smile has probably penetrated into our icon-painting from the Persian miniature of the late Middle Ages, whose popularity at the time was also growing in the West. The decorative feeling of the artist is shown in the manner in which he has painted the Hellenistic scale armour and the hard folds of the mantle, which leaves the impression of being made of cardboard or some other solid material, although

its bottom corner is broken in a dovetail shape. The long limbs make the figure appear unnatural and show the limitations of the artist's abilities.

The popular style in icon-painting reached a high stage of development in the work of the Prissovo school. Several talented and prolific icon-painters, whose work best reflects the popular tastes forming the style of late medieval Bulgarian painting, worked in the Prissovo Monastery near Turnovo in the 16th and 17th centuries. Actually painting never interrupted its development throughout the period of Ottoman domination. It is no chance that precisely here in Turnovo, the beautiful murals in the Church of Sts Peter and Paul were painted in the 15th century, while some of the finest murals of the 16th and 17th centuries may be seen in the famed Arbanassi Church of the Nativity and the church of the Kapinovo Monastery which was later burned down by the kurdjalis.

A 17th century icon from Prissovo depicting the Entry into Jerusalem (Fig. 34) is remarkable for its pathos and love of life. Making use of the basic elements of the established iconographical scheme the artist rids his composition from superfluous personages. The crowd of people who greet Christ is here reduced to several figures of men standing in front of the city gates, and two children who spread their garments in the path of Christ. The group of the apostles is also barely hinted at with a few figures. The composition is built in such a way as to place Christ in the centre. He is riding the ass who moves in an old Eastern ceremonial pace. This fact shows the power of observation of the artist, who with simple and even naive means of expression manages to convey the proper psychological atmosphere of the subject treated. The fortress walls of Jerusalem with the high tower over the city gates, balance the high rocks, shaped like steps, on the other side of the composition. The shortened proportions of the human figures once again show imperfections in draftsmanship in popular art. But the gay decoration, the luxuriant plant ornament, which the artist spread even under the fortress walls, create a pure and exuberant delight enhanced by the brilliant colour scheme of the icon. The faces, too, deserve notice. Their characteristic pointed noses, the deep wrinkles round the mouths and their arched eyebrows seem to revert to the same facial type. They are all animated by a deeply human expression of the eyes.

Another icon from Prissovo dating back to the same period and depicting Doubting Thomas, is also striking for its emotional quality (Fig. 35). The character of the saint obviously appealed to the artist. Without departing from the iconographical canons, he built up a compact and well-balanced composition, in which the attention is drawn entirely to the figure of Christ. The artist has brought the psychological conflict to its climax by the gesture of Christ stretching out his arm to show his wound to the unbeliever and by the timid and cynical gesture of Thomas who wants to touch the wound in order to make sure of his teacher's miraculous resurrection. Very convincingly the artist shows the moral superiority of proud confidence over fearful disbelief and mean curiosity. These feelings may be also read on the faces of the apostles whose figures balance the composition (Fig. 36).

The conclusion is that those popular works of art were not a chance phenomenon but a manifestation of a logical style which had long become established in practice, a style in which all methods of painting have been summed up and finally adapted to express an entire world outlook. According to this outlook the divine essence of the figure or the action is transposed over human tangibility without being vulgarized or becoming something ordinary. In this way our popular masters reverted to the demands of Dionysius Areopagite, but from a different aspect, from the point of view of their philosophy of life, according to which psyhological experiences are a basis of aesthetic perceptions and of the creation of works with intransient artistic value. This statement, how-

ever, does not deny the assertion made above, that the style of Bulgarian late medieval painting had become cruder and dryer. The icon-painters were gradually losing their feeling for plasticity, and their attempts to model volumes through brilliant highlights and heavy shadows resulted in the majority of cases in crude loud colour or a raw graphical effect. An icon from the village of Bulgarovo, Bourgas district, from the second half of the 17th century, best illustrates this point. It depicts Christ Pantokrator, without any departures from the traditional iconography of the figure (Fig. 37). The spiritual grandeur of the image, achieved through the graphic and decorative manner of the artist, is most imposing. This head with dark hair, beard and moustache, with eyes sunk in deep black shadow, remains impressed on the mind. The forehead, nose, cheeks and neck stand out as broad light spots. The firm line marking the features of the face lends a decorative conventionality to the portrait. This conventionality is felt particularly strongly in the naive manner in which the fingers raised in an attitude of blessing are arranged. The severe expression of the face shows a gloomy estrangement from life, only partially softened by the kind eyes, a fact emphasizing the symbolic and irrational character of the image. The relief decoration on the nimbus of Christ and the graphic features of the artist's style are a reversion to the principles of eastern decorative art, whose influence was felt at all stages of development in old Bulgarian art.

With the expansion of the Ottomans towards Southeastern and Central Europe, some decorative motifs created in the Orient were carried into the art of the European nations. This was felt particularly clearly in the miniature and in applied arts. New motifs appeared in the style of interlaced designs, popular among the Balkan nations. One encounters the widely spread asymmetrical three-leaf flowers, plant stems tied in knots, forming slender columns supporting tapering Oriental arches, and small animal figures arranged in a circle around a central motif. Obviously all these new elements in our ornaments had penetrated Bulgaria through trade in art objects: jewellery, brocade fabrics, Persian carpets, etc. There is, however, some curious evidence of artistic influence in the opposite direction: from Europe towards Asia. For instance, on some silver trays made in Central Asia, there appeared friezes with the figures of Christian saints, side by side with calligraphic quotations from the Koran. In the ornamentation of Turkish pottery a new motif appeared, consisting of a cross inside a circle, and in the ornamentation of wrought copper the design of fish — one of the oldest Christian symbols — was used. These data, though they are indirectly related to our subject, suggest that influences might have been exerted over Christian painting not only through the revival of old motifs and models, but also as a free give-and-take between the Balkan peoples and the surviving Christian population in Asia Minor, Syria and Iraq, which had not forgotten the old traditions and in spite of the unfavourable conditions for the development of religious painting, yet created some works of art, though crude and primitive.

Another factor which should not be ignored is the role of Armenian and Georgian art, which even in the most difficult days of desperate struggle against the Mohammedan invasion still guarded the behests of old Byzantine culture and its artistic traditions. For instance, several schools of icon-painting worked in Trebizond in the 16th and 17th century, and their works reached Bulgaria and Mount Athos. All this accounts for the presence of Oriental trends in our religious painting, a manifestation of which is the custom, popular in the 17th century, to engrave on the still soft ground the decorative motifs of plant origin, which after gilding the background of the icon create a lavish ornament recalling the decoration of the Persian brocades.

The increasing democratic and popular tendencies and the growing primitivism find an original ex-

pression in a large icon with the image of St George, now kept in the Church of St Pantheleimon in Boyana. The artist has done his best to build a solemn composition (Fig. 38). Generally developed according to the established iconographical scheme, the composition is free from architectural decor and characters of secondary importance. Only the figure of the boy has been retained, and that solely in order to recall the saint's deed of valour. The figures of the angels in the upper part of the composition, who place a crown on St George's head symbolizing his victory over evil, are also unusual. The artist has painted the big and strong body of the saint with inspiration. The exaggerated and boldly stylized forms of the horse show the artist's idea of a fine war horse and fully harmonize with the folklore description of a hero's steed. The ceremonial gesture of the saint stabbing the dragon and his severe and rigid soldier's face again remind us of the symbolic and naive expressionism of Eastern popular art of the early Byzantine period.

The stylization of the dragon is also interesting. Its body, tied in a decorative knot, and its widely yawning mouth point back to the traditions of the tertological style evolved in the 13th and 14th centuries in old Bulgarian book ornamentation (Fig. 39). The artist's keenness of observation finds expression in the precise rendering of details such as the high Turkish saddle, the tassels adorning the horse's trappings and the wide stirrup characteristic of the Turkish style of riding. The general brownish colour scheme of the icon supplements the clear and precise line. An early inscription in the lower part of the icon has been covered by one made at a later date, explaining that the icon was painted in 1079. This can hardly be accepted in the literal sense, however, but rather as an indication that the artist had tried to reproduce some old and very popular icon, which had suffered severely from exposure or was destroyed altogether in the 17th century.

The vulgarization of the popular style of icon-painting is evident in another icon of the late 17th century which was found in Samokov district (Fig. 40). The centre is occupied by Archangel Michael, with several scenes of his life around the figure. The composition of these scenes is crowded with character and architectural details creating an impression of naivety and crude decorative conventionality. Archangel Michael is represented full face with a bare sword in his right hand and an unfolded scroll in his left. According to the practice which had become popular in the late Middle Ages, he is depicted against a background of two colours which enhances the decorative impression of the work. The fondness of the master for decorative detail is seen in the painstakingly rendered ornamentation of the chain-mail and the widely spread wings of the archangel. A strip of grey on their inner side makes them appear unnatural. The ill-proportioned body and the artless expression of the face show the rural master's inability to rise above the crude, grotesque primitive, in spite of the fine model he used. The moderate greenish hues relieved only by several patches of red used in the garments, create a calm colour scheme and hint at the solemnity the artist had tried but failed to achieve. He tried to make up for his failures as painter by his excellence as decorator. The sculpted rosettes in the top corners of the inner frame and the elaborate ornamentation round the nimbus show that the artist's ability went as far as the use of an ornament which was in the basis of all Bulgarian folk art. In the lower part of the icon an inscription was painted between the inner and outer frame, but nearly effaced later.

The analysis of the examples we have discussed reveals that in the 17th century the Bulgarian icon-painters tried, to the best of their modest abilities, to show their individual conception of stylistic requirements. They showed great freedom in regard to established iconographical schemes, in their treatment of individual subjects as well as of details. Though they occasionally showed a feeling for space,

the artists were as yet ignorant of perspective, and the relation between the human figure and the architectural and landscape background is still unnatural and symbolic. The colour scheme, too, is unnatural, governed as it was by aesthetic principles which mainly stressed the decorative value of the work. Every icon, taken separately or as a part of a larger ensemble, such as the iconostasis, for instance, must possess decorative qualities which should make it fit into the interior of the church or house.

The development of wood-carving can serve as an example illustrating the requirements of the popular taste. From a plain wooden partition, the iconostasis began to turn in that period into a complicated façade with elaborate architectonics and rich wood-carved ornaments. The general interest in the decorative is manifested in the wood-carved frames, surrounding the central figures in the icons, as well as in the additional figures or scenes painted all around, which may have a direct or indirect bearing on the subject. In the cases when they are life scenes, they illustrate the story and with their numerous realistic details lend the compositions a genre character. The iron hold of the medieval feudal outlook and the circumstance that the church was practically the only employer, placed the artists in a disadvantageous and dependent position. Although the confidence of Bulgarian icon-painters was constantly growing, which was expressed in the increasing number of signed works, feudal autocracy continued to trample upon the dignity of the artist. The barbarous conditions created by Ottoman feudalism arrested the development of the Bulgarian people's creative forces for nearly two centuries more. The only studios for the Bulgarian icon-painters continued to be the churches, chapels and monks' cells. The dramatic struggles and the people's suffering made of the icon-painters ardent patriots and fighters. They often introduced patriotic subjects into religious painting, running the risk of clashing with the canon and with traditional ideas. Up to the end of the 18th century, there were hardly any organized manifestations of groups or societies of artists in the development of art in Bulgaria. The path that an individual painter was to follow was determined by his master who trained one or more pupils. This purely popular type of training had its negative as well as its positive sides. The new artist received the title of icon-painter. Most often he was not able to grasp entirely, and even partly, the art to which he had devoted himself. Regardless of his later development he was obliged to observe strictly the decrees of his master and the canons of the church. Because of the lack of literature and information and of the limited scope of action, the master and the church determined the artistic outlook of the beginner. But at the same time, as a result of the democratic type of training, popular artists came to the fore'.[31]

The 18th century saw profound changes in the economic and cultural life of the Bulgarians. Enterprising merchants established lasting business relations with the markets of the Near and Middle East, while others opened their offices in Central Europe and Russia. The Uzuncovo Fair assumed international trade importance. Artisan production grew rapidly and changed the appearance of Bulgarian towns. Craftsmen's guilds became a powerful factor in the social and cultural life of the developing Bulgarian nation. The changes in people's consciousness were even more substantial. Contacts with the outside world increased their knowledge. The need for education to train people for life began to be sharply felt. Schools were necessary, even though monastery schools. Parallel with the change in their minds, the Bulgarians' confidence began to change. They acquired the reputation of one of the most economically active ethnic elements in the Ottoman Empire. The attitude to man and his qualities began to change, too. Artistic tastes and requirements changed, including those in painting. Artists now had better hances to work, since the craftsmen's guilds and some private persons financed the reconstruction and

building of churches, chapels and nunneries. Large houses were built for the rich men, with their walls and ceilings painted with plant ornaments in very rich combinations of design and colour.

The *Slav-Bulgarian History*, written in 1762, roused among the people a sense of national identity and a revolutionary spirit. Even the sermons of the priests called for struggle againt the tyranny of Ottoman pashas and beys. Contacts with Russia, which grew stronger with every passing day, assumed an ever more marked political character. All these phenomena of the late 18th century continued strong during the following 19th century, determining the character of the Bulgarians' social and cultural life and shaping the style of Bulgarian art of the National Revival period.

In the church murals and icons, heavy with rich and gay ornamentation, the figures had entirely lost their old quality of mystic exaltation. 'Religious art no longer calls for a passive contemplation of the transcendental world, but for action in the name of life.'[32] The faces painted by our icon-painters smile affably at the viewer in a happy presentiment of long awaited freedom. Along with the names of the donors, the names of icon-painters began to appear more and more often, and obviously some of these thought very highly of their own work. All this cleared the ground for a free expression of the popular master's fantasy and creative thought. Icon-painting became a widely popular craft, taken up by hundreds of people some of whom had the barest minimum of training and no talent. Names of women icon-painters have also been recorded, a fact that would have sounded as a sacrilege at an earlier period. Kina and Tota Dimitrova, Natsa Genchova, Ivanka and Natsa Nikolova, Donka and Mana Vitanova, Kina Ivan Kalcheva, and other women, were active in the sphere of art in the 19th century in the towns of Tryavna and Teteven. Breaking away from sacraments and religious ritual, the masters of the National Revival also broke with the specific features of the classical icon.[33] This was the ideal environment for the development of the popular primitive. Relieved of the burden of tradition, he sometimes gave brilliantly simple and original solutions of compositions, figures and decoration, instilling them with unique vitality.

In a Plovdiv icon bearing the date 1763, we see the figure of Archangel Michael painted full length, full-face and static, executed in the spirit of traditional iconographical concepts (Fig. 41). Although the icon is of modest size — 68 by 40 centimetres — the artist tried to make the figure monumental to fill it with grim and severe grandeur befitting the character depicted. The same effect is sought in the use of the dark brown colour scheme, which effectively emphasizes the suggestions the artist tried to get across. The artist was not able to resist the temptation of richly decorating the garments and wings of the archangel. These are elements suggesting the joy and versatility of life and they are in contrast with the general impression of cold and gloomy grandeur. The artist has painstakingly painted the curved narrow sword in the right hand of the figure, the little feathers on the wings and the Baroque ornamentation of the chain-mail. His limited knowledge of the anatomy of the human body makes the figure appear awkward and conventional, particularly the rigid expression of the face, enhanced by the white light spread over it in large decorative patches. The firm and vigorous drawing of the artist shows that he was familiar with the principles of icon-painting and knew how to render his character's emotional states. In the narrow margin between the frame of the icon and the tip of the archangel's left wing an inscription in white letters may be seen: 'By the hand of John the year 1763' (Fig. 42).

The primitivism of Bulgarian popular painting of the early National Revival period is seen in yet another icon: St Marina on the Throne (Fig. 43). In the composition the artist has borrowed elements from the iconography of The Virgin Crowned. The finely

drawn head with a lively and intelligent face and the crude naivety with which the lower part of the body is represented show that the master copied an older model of a bust. The rendering of the lower part of the body, which he had to cope with alone, reveals his naivety and low level of professional training. The heavy proportions of the throne, crowded with large but flat Baroque volutes, and the sizes of the legs exaggerated to the point of absurdity, recall the archaic preference for monumental effects encountered in some Bulgarian sculptural works of the early medieval period.[34] In spite of all this, the figure of St Marina carries conviction. The movement of the knees, though ever so naively rendered, breaks the general static effect of the whole and combined with the bright and decorative colour scheme, ranging from carrot-red to turquoise, enlivens the whole figure in a highly original manner. The master has carried his subject to another field of vision treating his problems as viewed from a different aesthetic angle. His primitive symbolism is based on the spontaneous emotion, on the general idea, on the dramatic opposition of the important and meaningful to the transient and amusing. What is astonishing in the artist's style is the fact that he revives the methods of old Eastern art of the early Byzantine period. This is not a sign of conservatism or of fanatical devotion to ancient tradition, but rather a product of the common features in the outlook of the Bulgarian master-primitivist and of the old Eastern artist.

These elements are even more apparent in another icon of the late 18th century, depicting the Birth of the Virgin (Fig. 44). It was kept for a time at the Church of the Forty Martyrs in Turnovo and is now housed in the annex of the National Art Gallery in Sofia. It offers an entirely free interpretation of the established iconographical scheme and with its charming naivety gives a new meaning to the subject. The architectural decor, unencumbered by details, the grotesque stylization of the figures are the result, not only of the artist's limited powers, but also of his personal attitude to the subject treated. With these primitive means of expression he wishes to put a stress on the action, to lend a nearly ritual solemnity to the scene, to bring to the fore what is unique and joyful in it. To this end he uses the old manner of the Egyptian and Mesopotamian art — drawing the figures on different planes and ridding the scene from superfluous detail and extreme stylization of forms to lend a monumental quality to the figures. The interesting, though at first sight illogical, architecture with an ascending arrangement of lattice windows, creates a segmented architectural rhythm which is supplemented by the rhythm of the stiff contour line. We cannot agree entirely with the assumption of certain art historians that the painter of the icon aimed at a decorative rather than a psychological effect.[35] On the contrary, the artist, with all means at his disposal, tried to stress the divine and solemnly ceremonial atmosphere of the event. His style is another matter. It is indeed purely decorative. This is apparent in his large-headed and awkward figures, in the even colouring in which there are no transitions or nuances, but merely flat surfaces of a definite shape covered with paint. In spite of all this the colouring is the main factor which creates the festive mood of the icon. The secret is in the bold expressionistic combinations of bright and intense patches of colour, which create a special rhythm and elated mood in the whole work. The ease with which the artist avoids everything that is not subordinated to his central idea is quite charming. He is not interested in the real appearance of things, they exist for him only in so far as they help him to express his idea. For instance, he paints St Anne lying on an invisible but implied bed, and her two hands, which she stretches out to wash herself issue from a single sleeve. Carried away by his enthusiasm, the artist forgets to depict the newborn Virgin. Later, realizing his 'insignificant omission', so as not to enter into contradiction with his subject, he

hurriedly sketches a face with a nimbus in a white rectangle at the lower part of the icon. The fact that along with the women bringing sweets to the mother, he depicts Joachim as a central character, shows his feeling for realism, which gives a genre effect to the whole composition.

Another icon from the Turnovo district, which was painted at the same time, possesses nearly the same power of a primitive but moving art. Depicting the two proud horsemen — St Dimiter and St George (Fig. 45) it follows a very rare iconographical scheme: the two saints are painted together and accompanied by all the other characters that are usually painted with them—the princess and her parents with St George and the conquered enemy with St Dimiter. The artist has succeeded in uniting all elements in a well-balanced composition and in recreating the joyful exultation at the victory. He places the figures in depth, trying to build up a composition on many different planes, a sure sign of his power of observation and flair for realism. The bold stylization of the figures and the use of typical details to the exclusion of all other, shows the popular master's talent for broad generalizations. The artist makes his narrative vivid by a selection of the most telling details, which shows his respect for tradition. The atmosphere created by his two horsemen is reminiscent of some other representations of horsemen carved over a thousand years earlier in the building stones of Pliska and Preslav, whose appearance and meaning point back to the art of the Turkic and Sarmatian peoples of the age of the great migration of the peoples. This is the demonstration of a tradition engendered by the outlook of a people with a strong feeling of personal dignity and historical identity. A tradition which had outlived its time and which, after nearly a thousand years, in a new atmosphere of patriotic upsurge, emerged from the depths of the national consciousness, to become again the symbol of struggle — the struggle which the Bulgarian people waged for their independence.

The creative freedom of the Bulgarian popular master and his strong feeling for the decorative may be also seen in another icon of the late 18th century, which was probably the work of Tryavna artists. It depicts The Last Supper in an old Cappadocian version, in which the apostles are sitting at a broad, round table (Fig. 46). What is more remarkable in this case is that the artist has painted all the figures facing the viewer, thus trying to emphasize the solemn and ceremonial character of the scene. He has also approached the architectural decor in a rational manner — the elaborate interior has been reduced to a simplified and decorative arcade, which suggests the place of the action, while the rhythm of the arches enhances the general effect of the composition. The conventional attitudes and decor and the abstract blue background over which the figures seem appliquéd, stress the imaginary character of this painting, which the fantasy of the artist and the primeval force of popular art have turned into a rich tale, capturing the imagination.

Roughly the same style characteristics may be seen in an icon executed by the Tryavna masters in the early 19th century. It represents St George fighting the dragon, but in a composition which follows the established iconography only in its general lines (Fig. 47). The architectural decor is reduced to a single tower, which is very similar in appearance to the Bulgarian clock towers of the National Revival period. The horse's head, painted both full-face and in profile, recalls the old manner of the Bulgarian artists of the 9th century, who left such masterpieces of popular art as the stone relief of a lioness found at Nova Zagora. Painted in the act of leaping, the horse of our icon-painter does not touch the ground with his hind legs and creates the impression of being appliquéd over the blue background of the composition. The firm and generalized drawing makes the figures appear flat and rigid, but this has not prevented the artist from expressing in the faces of the saint and of the boy behind him the tension

of their struggle with the dragon. The stylization of the dragon is also interesting. Its spirally coiled tail, its fleshy wings, resembling rubber, and the decorative folds in its muzzle betray the influence of Eastern ornaments, which played a considerable role in Bulgarian decorative art during the National Revival period.

Another icon from Tryavna of the same period depicts the Trinity of the Old Testament, but in a setting different from that of the accepted iconographical scheme (Fig. 48). There is no trace of the buildings of Abraham's palace here, nor of the celebrated oak at Mamre. The action is moved into the interior of a rich Bulgarian house of the National Revival period with its characteristic elliptical arches, supported by slender woodcarved columns. Lack space has forced the artist to paint Abraham and Sarah above the heads of the archangels, but in this way he has not destroyed the composition of the scene or entered into conflict with iconographical prescriptions. The musty bluish-green colour scheme and the rigid figures with uniform and expressionless faces show the extreme primitivism of popular icon-painting, which reduces it to a level of a mediocre craft. Freshness of feeling though not of the means of expression is offered by yet another primitivistic work — an icon of the late 19th century depicting the conception of St Anne. In spite of the grotesque crudity of images, the artist has achieved an enviable unity between composition and subject-matter. In the stiff embrace of the aging spouses made happy by the expectation of parenthood, there is much freshness, immediacy and genuineness of feeling. In order to stress the optimistic character of the subject, the artist has painted blooming flowers and grass at the feet of Joachim and Anne, thus conveying a notion of the new life being born. Their figures show the extreme primitivism of an entirely unschooled hand, but they also exude great joy and that makes them acceptable to the viewer. The spontaneous humanism of the master lends this crude rural painting the charm of an unpretentions genre study, warmed by the bright joy of these good and humble people. The examples considered will convince us that even the absolute primitives cannot be treated as a sign of decline in Bulgarian popular art. It is true that in them the specific Byzantine aestheticism has been superseded by a freer and more concrete artistic conception, but these primitives reflect the freedom-loving spirit of the Bulgarian people and their intolerance of the cold mysticism and alienation of the Byzantine style. The popular primitives carry the enchantment of naive simplicity of soul. Their crude and grotesque figures are touching with their realistic details which in the artist's eyes are more important than the subject itself. The popular master will stop at nothing in order to make his narrative clearer and attain the highest conviction. He may sacrifice anatomical precision, invent a fantastic gesture or attitude, or eliminate everything and concentrate on a single characteristic detail. The popular master is fond of strong emotion. He makes pathetic and moving use of dramatic gestures, like an actor in a tragedy by Aeschylus. But he is also a brilliant colourist. Always subordinated to his central idea, his colour scheme serves to render the psychological characterization of the figures and the whole atmosphere of the subject treated. Precisely the colouring with its emotional impact makes up in part for the imperfections in the drawing and composition of primitive works.

A realist by nature, the Bulgarian icon-painter likes to make things concrete, specifying the place and time of action. In his rendering of costume, architecture, landscape, types, attitudes, weapons and accessories he always relies on direct observation, without, however, sinking to naturalism. During the Middle Ages thrones, garments, crowns, weapons, etc., were drawn from the court ceremony of Byzantium and the other Balkan states. Later on, we see the accessories changing under the influence of other

factors. Oriental robes, turbans and Eastern canopies made their appearance, as well as Turkish yataghans, high saddles, Italian baroque crowns and pseudo-antique garments. This adds to the value of Bulgarian popular painting as historical information. The constant reversions to the early models of the Eastern preiconoclastic painting shows the preference of the Bulgarian master for a poetic and imaginative way of thinking, for emphasizing man's spiritual beauty and moral virtues. The dry and didactic Gospel narrative, recreated by the artist's imagination, gains a new fulness and vitality.

Bulgarian popular art has left numerous examples from almost all periods of its historical development. It offers vast and rich material for the study of the culture and view of life of the Bulgarian people throughout their eventful history. Bulgarian popular art offers to the specialists valuable indications of the relations and continuity between antique and medieval culture, and throws light on the connexions and influences between the European and Asian peoples. Finally, it helps us to understand the character of Bulgarian art and thus determine its place in the treasure-house of human culture.

Fig. 1. St Theodore Stratilates, painted ceramic icon from the Patleina Monastery near Preslav, 10th century

Fig. 2. St Basil and St Nicholas, fragment from a mural painting in the Church of St Vrachi in Kostour, Yugoslavia, 11th century


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Fig. 3. Apostles, mural painting in the Church of St Luke in Phocis, Greece, 11th century

Fig. 4. The prophet Abraham, Coptic icon from the church in Bawit, 6th-7th century; tempera on sandalwood, size 37 x 24 cm. Berlin State Museum, No 6114

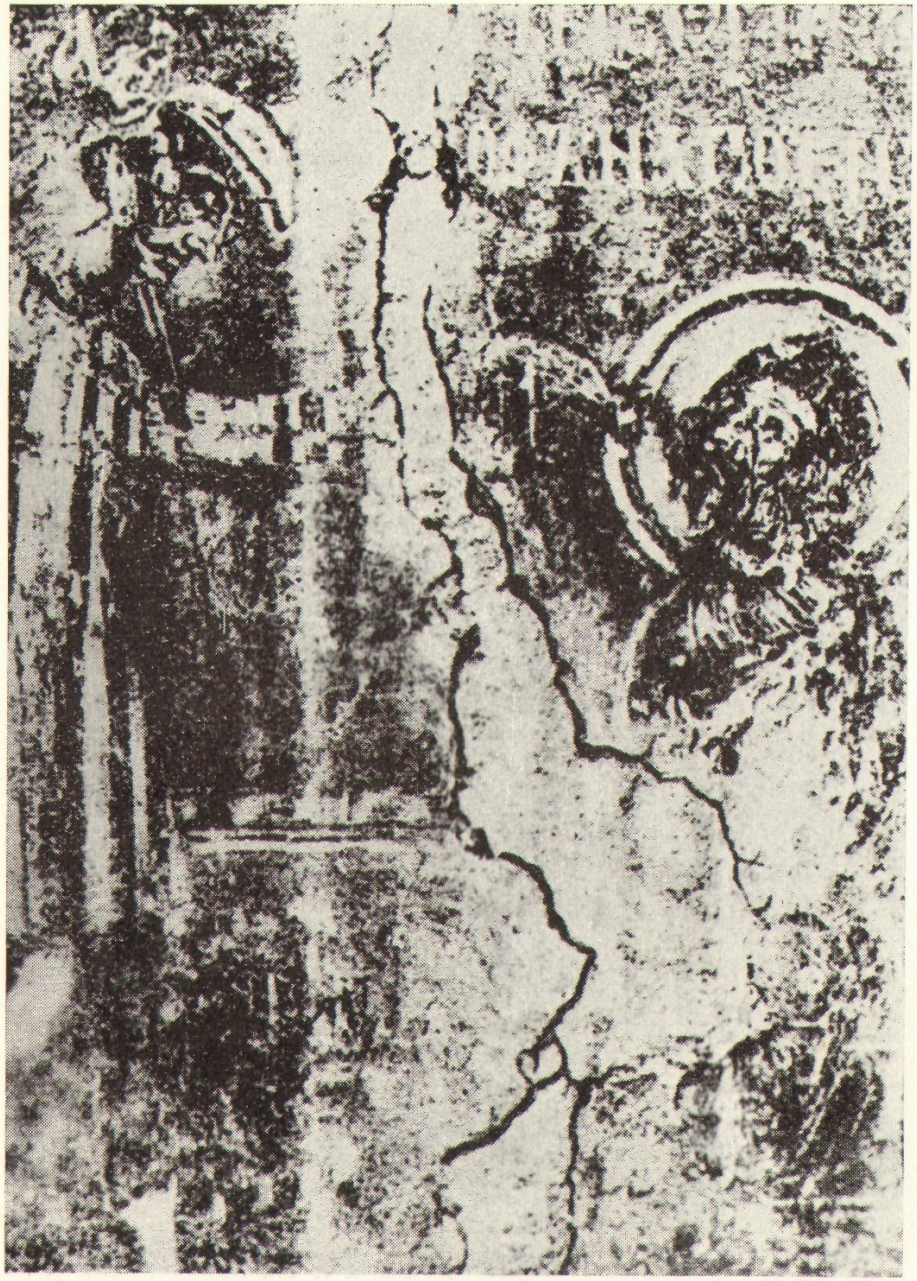

Fig. 5. A calendar scene depicting the martyrdom of a saint, mural painting in the Church of the Holy Martyrs in Veliko Turnovo, 1230

Fig. 6. Church Fathers, mural painting in the apse of the Church of St Peter in the village of Berendé, Sofia district, 13th century


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Fig. 7. Detail from the composition The Dormition of the Virgin from the murals in the same church, 13th century

Fig. 8. St Theodore Stratilates, mural painting in the western vault of the dome in the Zemen Monastery chapel, 14th century

Fig. 9. The Judgement of Pilate, mural painting in the western arm of the same domed-cross type church

Fig. 10. Despot Deyan, donor's portrait in the same church

Fig. 11. Despotitsa Doya, donor's portrait in the same church

Fig. 12. Donor's portrait in the south-western vault in the Church of St John the Baptist in Nessebur, 14th century

Fig. 13. Angel riding a horse, detail from The Nativity scene painted on the southern wall of the domed-cross type church of St Theodore Stratilates at the village of Boboshevo, Kyustendil district, 14th century

Fig. 14. The Virgin Mary, detail from The Ascension scene in the murals of the same church, 14th century

Fig. 15. Second servant-girl, detail from the composition The Denial of Peter in the same church, 14th century

Fig. 16. St Arsenius, icon of the end of the 14th century; tempera on walnut wood, size 80 x 53 cm. The Rila Monastery Museum, No. 281

Fig. 17. Donors' portraits of Radoslav Mavur and his wife Vida in the north-western part of the narthex of the Dragalevtsi Monastery church near Sofia, 1476

Fig. 18. Donors' portraits of the boyar Radivoi with his family and the Sofia bishop Kalivit, mural paintings in the Kremikovtsi Monastery church near Sofia, 1493

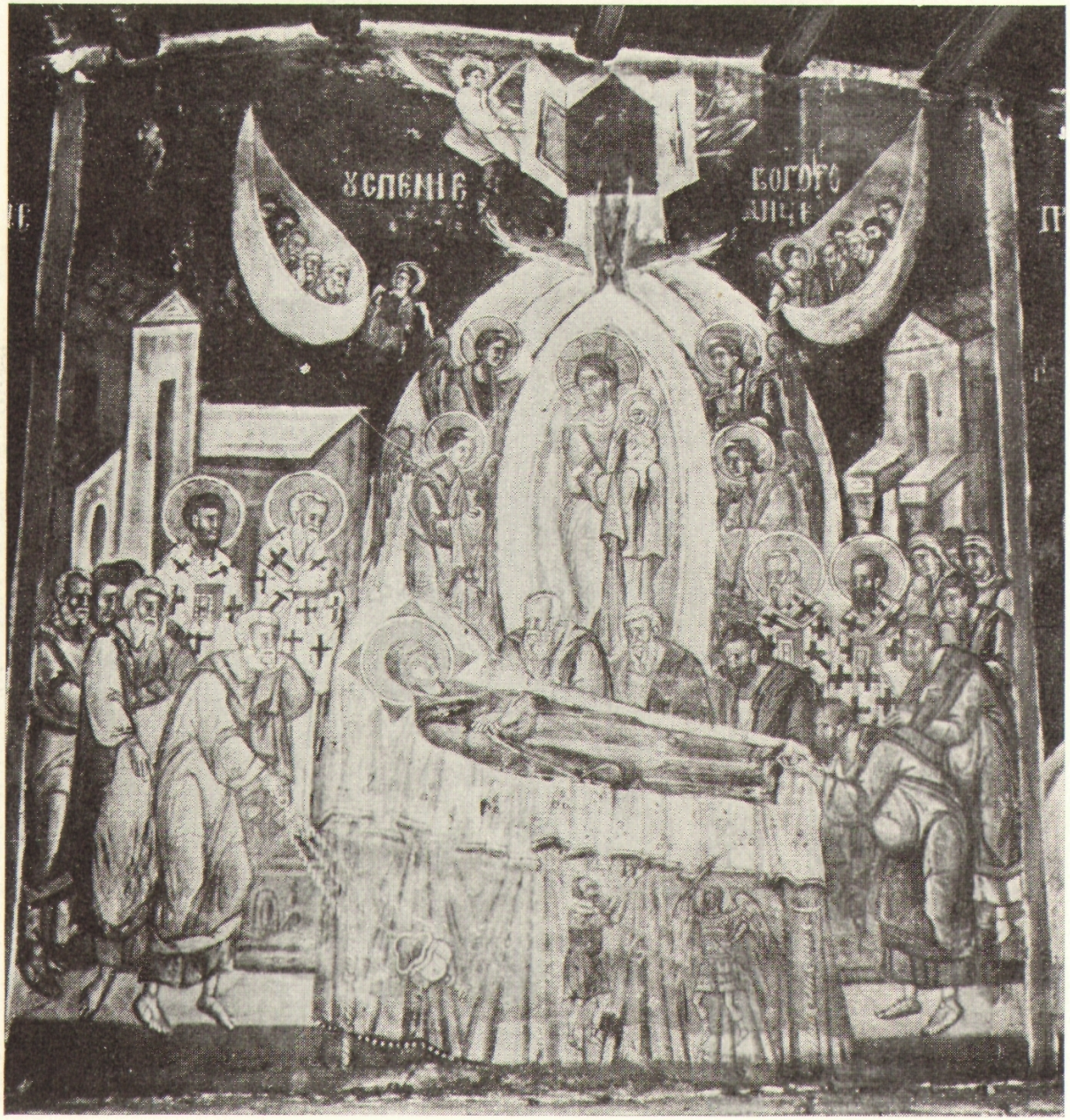
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Fig. 19. The Dormition of the Virgin, mural painting in the Orlitsa Cloister, Rila Monastery, 1491

Fig. 20. The Virgin Orans, mural painting in the same church

Fig. 21. St Peter of Alexandria, mural painting in the old church in Maritsa village, Samokov district, 16th-17th century

Fig. 22. St Joachim Sarandaporski, mural painting in the Church of St Theodore Stratilates in the village of Dobursko, Blagoevgrad district, 1614

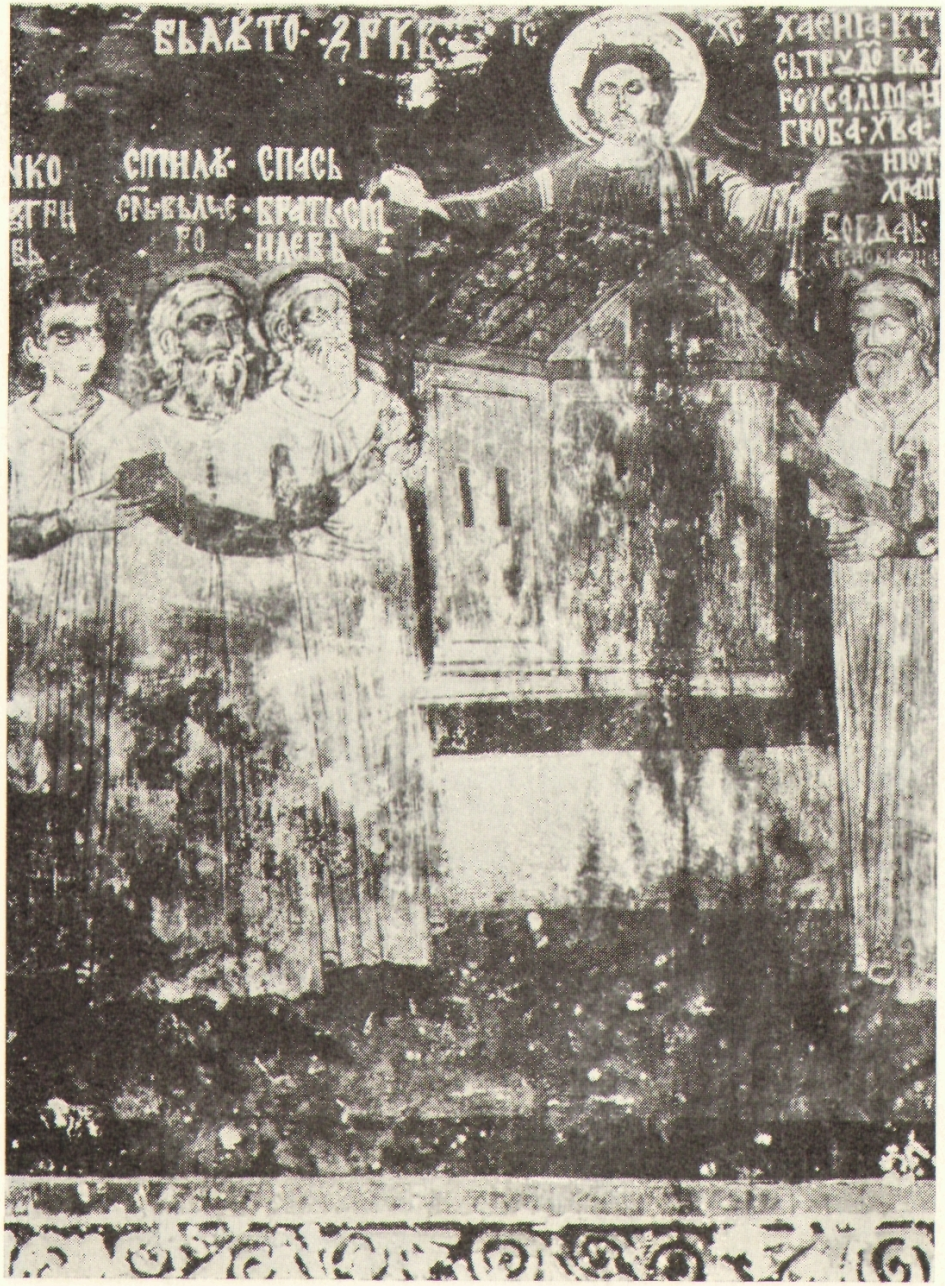

Fig. 23. Group portrait of donors in the same church, painted on the western wall, to the right of the entrance

Fig. 24. The Presentation in the Temple, fragment of a mural taken from the ruined church in the village of Krapets, near Pernik, 17th century. The painting has been transposed on canvas, size 110 x 110 cm. Sofia Archaeological Museum, No 388

Fig. 25. Detail from the same fragment

Fig. 26. St Mercurius, fragment of the murals in the same church, 17th century. The painting has been transposed on canvas, size 60 x 57 cm. Sofia Archaeological Museum, No 433

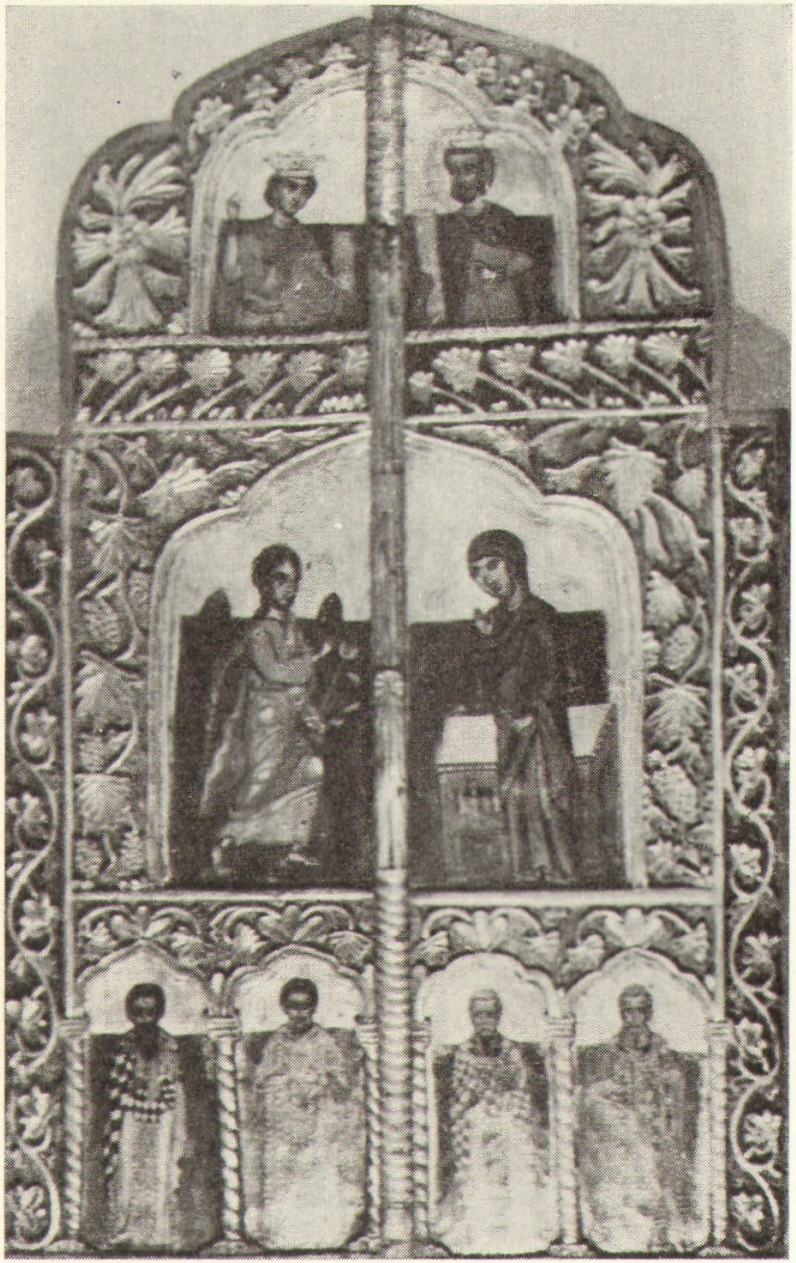

Fig. 27. Altar door from the Poganovo Monastery, 1620; tempera on wood and gilt, size 121 x 76 x 4 cm. Sofia Archaeological Museum, No 1926

Fig. 28. Three saints, icon from Turnovo district, 17th century; tempera on lime-wood, size 90 x 60 x 3 cm. Turnovo District Museum. No X-69

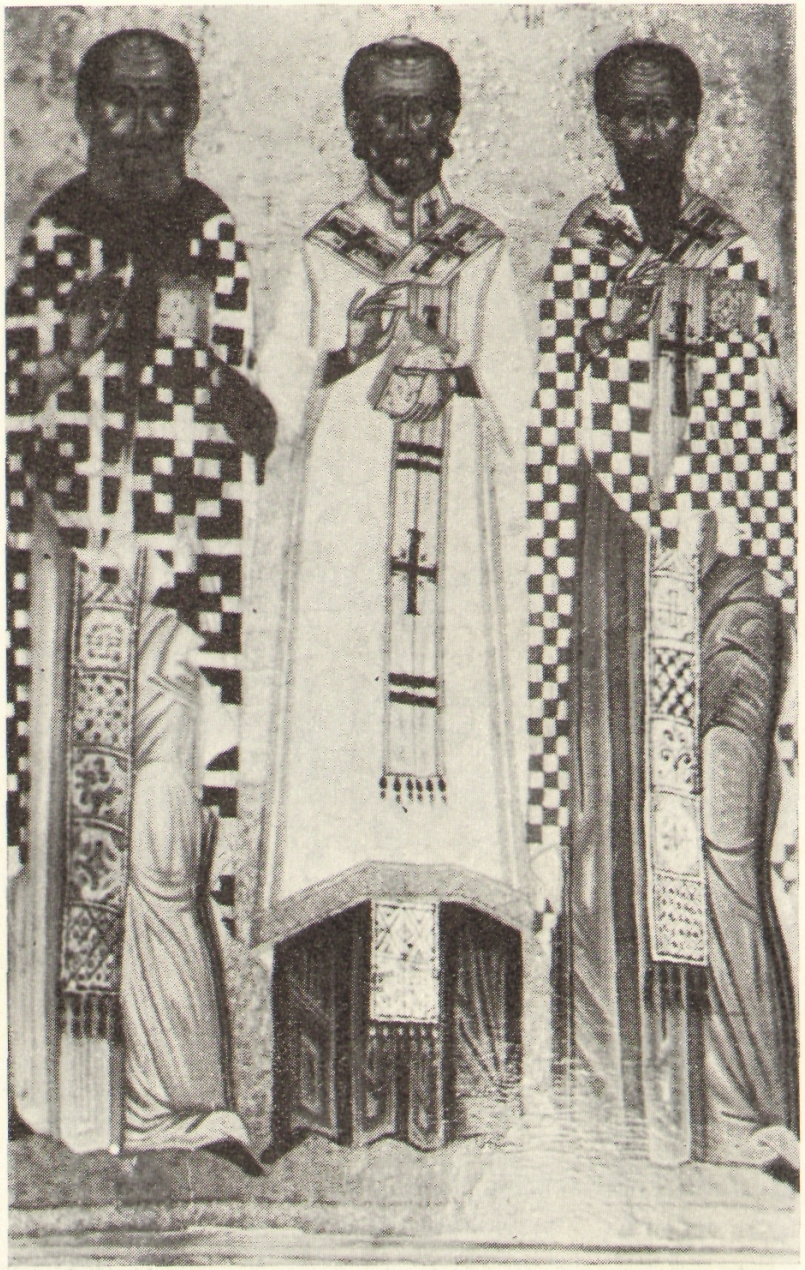

Fig. 29. Deesis, icon from the Church of the Dormition of the Virgin in Veliko Turnovo, 1865; tempera on limewood, size 86 x 69 x 3 cm. *Sofia Archaeological Museum*, No 1472

Fig. 30. Christ Pantokrator icon from the Church of St Petka in the village of Belchin near Samokov, 1642

Fig. 31. St George Stabbing the Dragon, 1684, icon from the Church of the Virgin in Veliko Turnovo; tempera on pear wood, size 90 x 72 x 3 cm. Sofia Archaeological Museum, No 1470. At the bottom of the icon is a Greek inscription saying: 'The year of God 1684: painted by the hand of John from Chivinodol.'

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Fig. 32. Detail from the same icon, from the scenes depicting the life of the saint

Fig. 33. Archangel Michael, icon from Turnovo district, 17th century, tempera on wood, size 94 x 54 x 2.5 cm. Veliko Turnovo District Museum, No X-50

Fig. 34. Entry into Jerusalem, icon from the 17th century, Prissovo schooi; tempera on wood, size 40.5 x x 35 x 3 cm, Turnovo District Museum, No X-111

Fig. 35. Doubting Thomas; icon from the 17th century, Prissovo school; tempera on wood, size 40 x 34 x 3.5 cm. Veliko Turnovo District Museum, No X-47

Fig. 36. Detail from the same icon

Fig. 37. Christ Pantokrator, icon from the village of Bulgarevo, Bourgas district, 17th century; tempera on wood, size 65 x 44 x 3 cm. Ecclesiastical Museum, Sofia, No 3915
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Fig. 38. St George, icon from the Church of St Pantheleimon in Boyana, Sofia district 17th century; tempera on wood, size 126 x 97 x 4 cm. Sofia Archaeological Museum, No 3823

Fig. 39. Detail from the same icon

Fig. 40. Archangel Michael, icon from Samokov district, 17 century; tempera on oak-wood, size 117 x 95 x 3.5 cm. Sofia Archaeological Museum, No 1623

Fig. 41. Archangel Michael, icon from Plovdiv district, 1763; tempera on wood, size 68 x 40 x 4 cm. Ecclesiastical Museum, Sofia, No 3790. In the narrow margin between the frame of the icon and the tip of the archangel's left wing is the inscription: 'By the hand of John, the year 1763.'

Fig. 42. St Marina, icon of the late 18th century, folk primitive; tempera on wood, size 148 x 104 x 3.5 cm. Eccle, siastical Museum, Sofia, No 3920

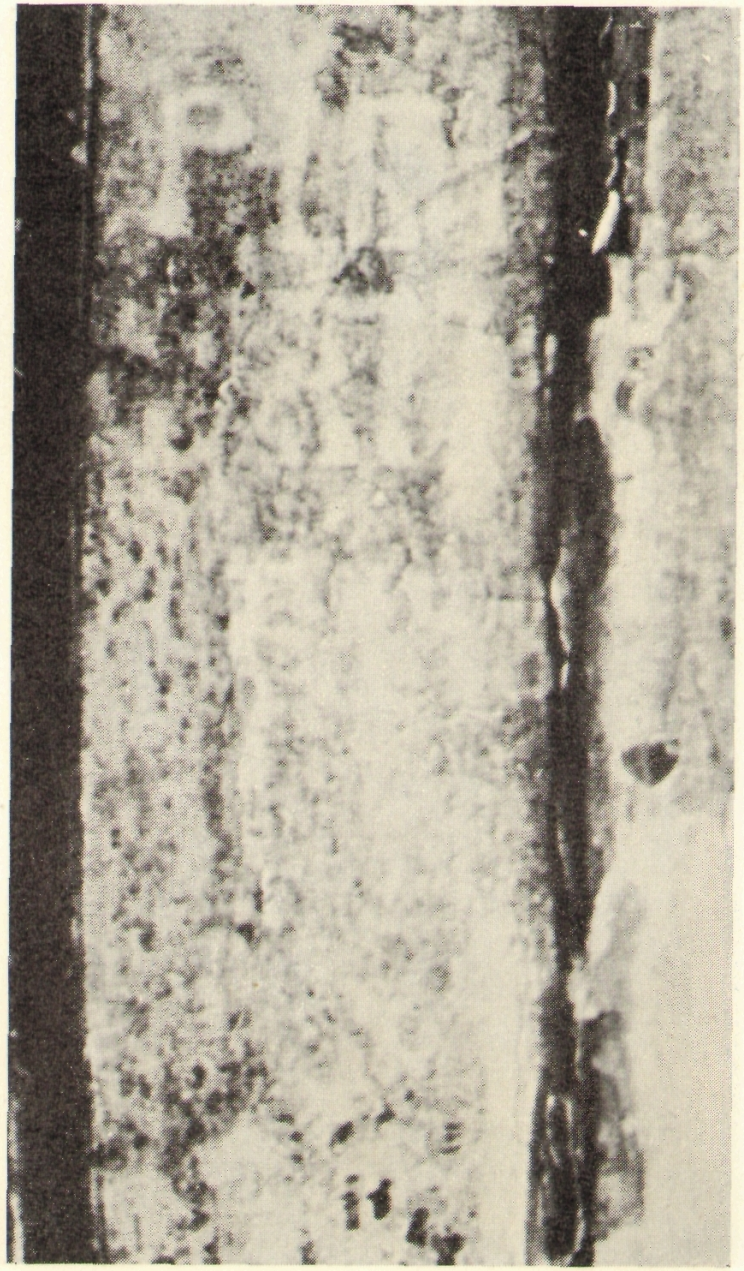

Fig. 43. The inscription on the icon, detail

Fig. 44. The Birth of the Virgin, icon of the late 18th century, folk primitive, from the Church of the Forty Martyrs in Veliko Turnovo; tempera on wood, size 57 x 49 x 3 cm. National Art Gallery, No 4
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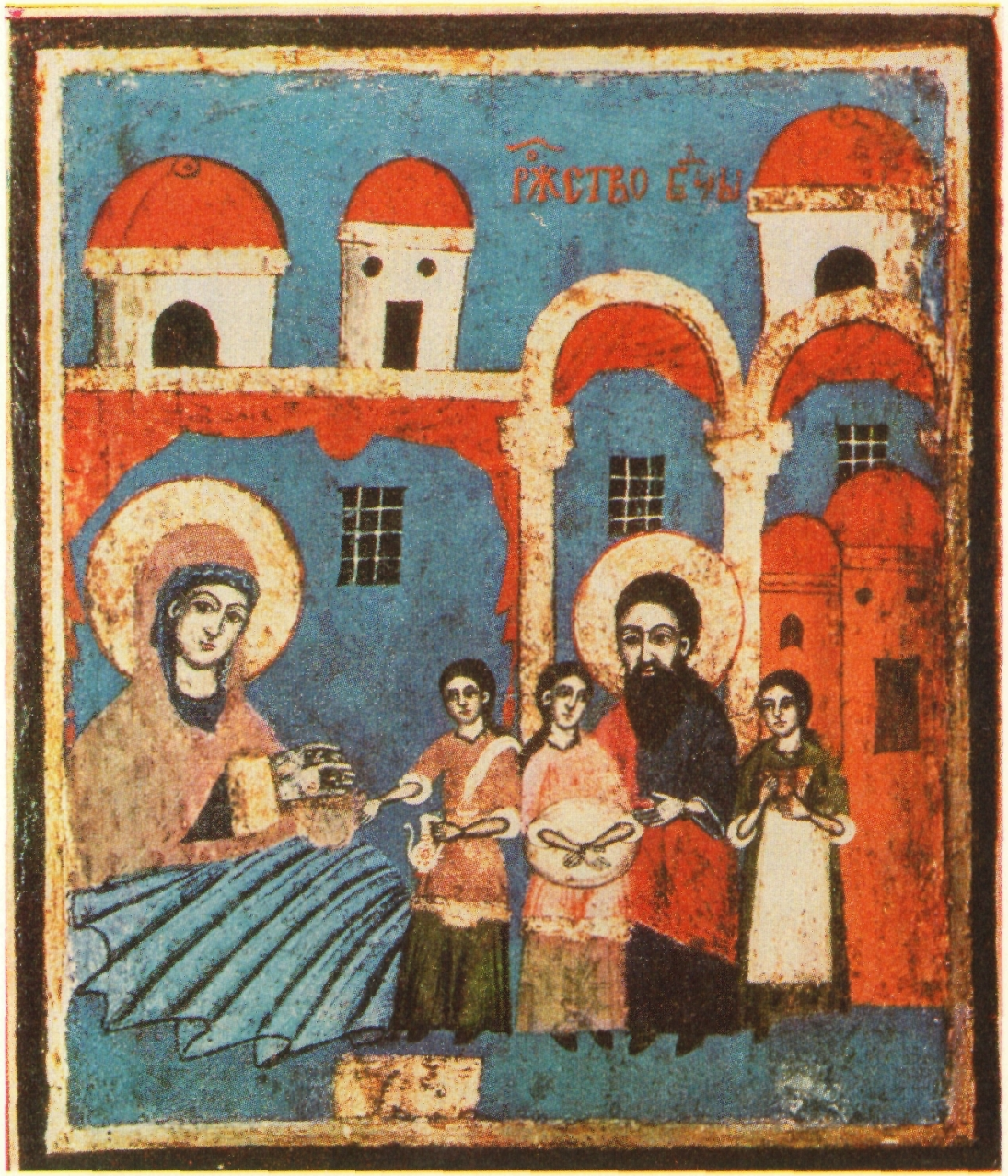


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Fig. 45. St Dimiter and St George, icon of the late 18th century, folk primitive; tempera on wood, size 100 x 77 x 4 cm. National Art Gallery, No 386

Fig. 46. The Last Supper, icon of the late 18th century, folk primitive, Tryavna school; tempera on wood, size 33 x 23 x 2 cm. Sofia Archaeological Museum, No 3952


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Fig. 47. St George Stabbing the Dragon, icon of the late 18th century, Tryavna school; tempera on wood, size 65 x 50 x 3 cm. Sofia Archaeological Museum, No 983

Fig. 48. The Old Testament Trinity and Saints, icon of the early 19th century, Tryavna school; tempera on wood, size 53 x 42 x 2 cm. Sofia Archaeological Museum, No 437

Fig. 49. The Embrace of St Anne and St Joachim, icon of the 19th century, folk primitive; tempera on wood, size 35 x 25 x 2 cm. Sofia Archaeological Museum, No 144

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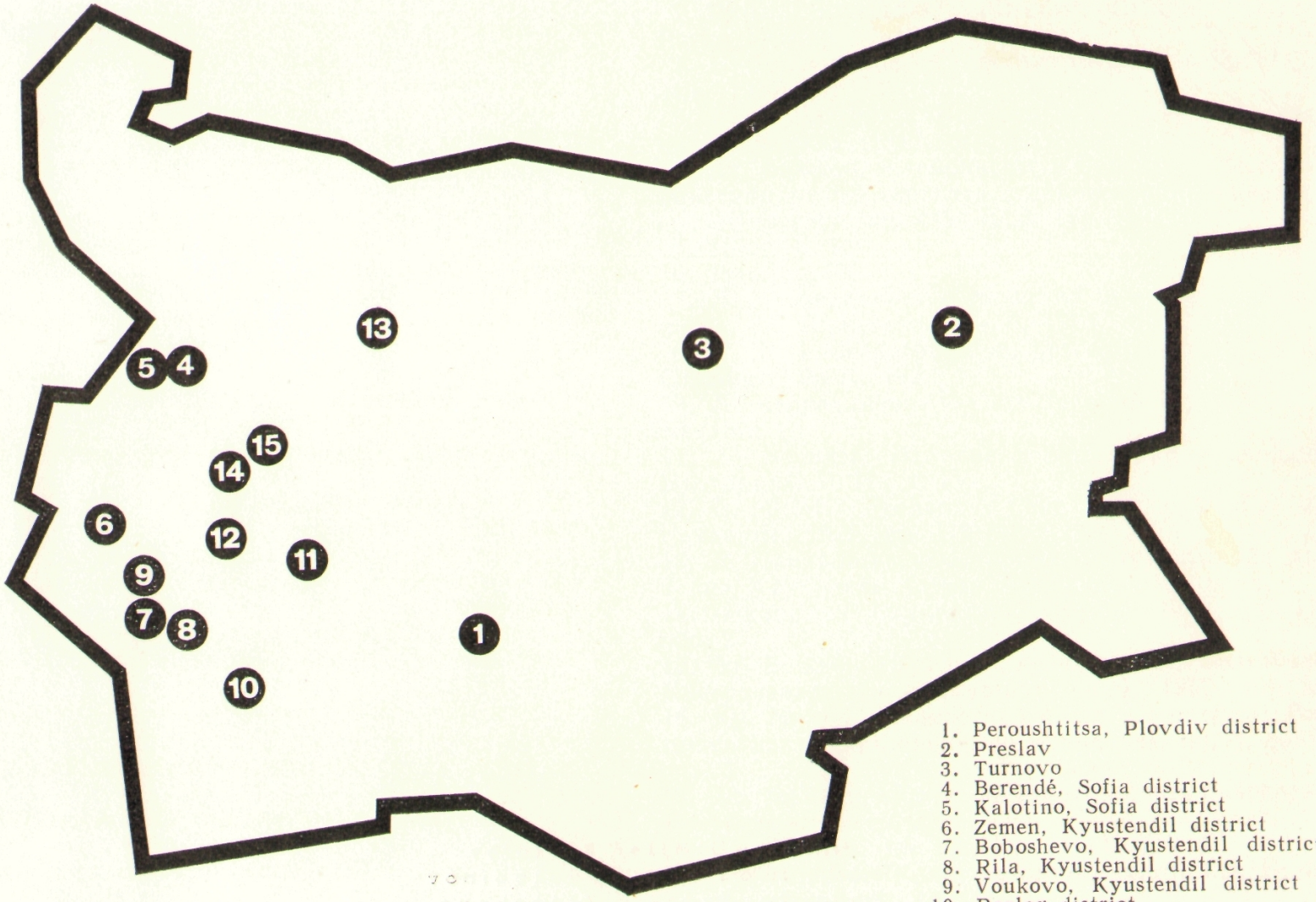

1. Peroushtitsa, Plovdiv district
2. Preslav
3. Turnovo
4. Berendé, Sofia district
5. Kalotino, Sofia district
6. Zemen, Kyustendil district
7. Boboshevo, Kyustendil district
8. Rila, Kyustendil district
9. Voukovo, Kyustendil district
10. Razlog district
11. Maritsa, Samokov district
12. Alin Monastery, Samokov district
13. Gligora Rock Church near Karloukovo, Vratsa district
14. Dragalevtsi Monastery, Sofia
15. Kremikovtsi Monastery, Sofia district

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